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THE SECRET OF THE MARSHES

By VICTOR L. WHITECHURCH

ILLUSTRATED BY LANCELOT SPEED

CHAPTER I

RUNDLEHAM MARSHES look exactly the same to-day as they did on that bright Christmas Eve nearly twenty years ago. Rundleham itself has scarcely changed from the quiet little fishing village it was then. It is true that the old Crown Inn, that venerable hostelry, with its queer cellars and double roof that could tell many a tale of the old smuggling times when it harboured the tubs that bronze-faced men brought over from Fécamps, ay, and sometimes harboured the men as well when the preventive officers were stirred to action—it is true, I say, that the Crown Inn has a sprinkling of summer guests, and that a few cards with the legend, "Apartments to Let" may be seen in some of the fishermen's cottages, luring stray artists who come to record on canvas the lovely tints of the Marshes. But Rundleham is too ungetatable to be in danger of bathing-machines, nigger minstrels, and a parade for many years to come, unless, indeed, the octopus-like railway should throw out a disturbing tentacle from its main line running through Burchester, some six miles inland. But this is not likely, and the very notion of such a thing is scorned by Jim Ide, the present representative of the immemorial family of Burchester carriers, whose arms might well be "A covered cart, verte—motto, 'Very slow, but sure—and reasonable.'"

Rundleham is a small village, partly nestling round the church, which stands some quarter of a mile from the low-lying shore, and partly scattered. The inhabitants thereof are chiefly fisherfolk, and the predominant fair hair and blue eyes tell plainly of their Saxon descent, even if the name ending in "ham" were not sufficient to make this apparent. It lies in a nook in the coast, sheltered from the south-westerly winds that rage up the Channel by a little promontory running out to the southward.

Just where the promontory begins to jut out into the sea lie the Rundleham Marshes, to the west of the village, a large expanse of many acres of land. The sun was shining brightly over them that winter morning, and the frost-bound country was sparkling with replying smiles. Perhaps the "Marshes" is almost a deceptive term, for between the patches of wet ground with the dry brown reeds of the season was many a broad expanse of meadow-land, where "lazy, meek-faced cattle strayed to graze." Winding through marsh and meadow, with many a twist and turn, like a huge snake encompassing his domain, was a sluggish stream, called in the language of that southern county a "rife," which finally found its way into the sea through a sluice. The sluice itself was very ancient. Huge beams of weather-beaten oak, supported by piles, spanned the stream, and formed a rude sort of bridge, rather hazardous in the crossing thereof,

especially when the tide was running strong up to the sluice-gates and one looked down into the swirling black waters as one picked one's way along the rickety beams.

Standing upon the bank nearest Rundleham was a man of some thirty years of age, a tall, strong-looking fellow, dressed in the style of a country farmer, with grey homespun suit and buff leggings. The gun which he carried in his hand and the wallet of cartridges slung over his shoulder showed plainly that he was on sporting intent. And those who knew anything of the Rundleham Marshes would tell you that for wildfowl and gulls there was no better winter shooting ground in the county. He was a fresh-faced man, with slight side whiskers, a keen grey eye, and that peculiarly frank and pleasant expression of countenance which an Englishman loves.

And yet John Lingwood was no country squire or farmer, such as he might easily have been mistaken for. Away to the northward, where the tall spire of Burchester rose from the plain, just under the shadow of the South Downs, was a sombre brick house, bearing on its door a brass plate with the legend: "Tribe and Lingwood, Solicitors." The former name might have been struck out these two years or more, for every one knew that old Gregory Tribe had retired from the partnership and that John Lingwood ruled the dingy offices supremely. A general favourite in town and country was John Lingwood, the Burchester lawyer, not so much on account of his profession as by reason of his love of sport. "Blunt John," as he was sometimes nicknamed, was famous for being the best bat in all local cricket-matches and the quickest shot in the turnip-field that the district owned. Not that he neglected his work, for many a client knew him as a shrewd man of business, and, young as he was, some of the best people in the neighbourhood were not slow to call in the services of John Lingwood when the mysteries of the law required them.

He had ridden over that morning from Burchester for the sake of a few hours' shooting, taking advantage of the slack time occasioned by the Christmas season. His horse he had left in the Crown stables and a meal awaited him later on at the Vicarage. Rundleham was used to the clatter of his horse-hoofs, for the village knew well that the rising young lawyer was engaged to the daughter of the white-haired old Vicar, sweet Margaret Kingslake, whom they all loved. And people said, too, that if ever there were a love match it was this one. And it seemed as if an ideal union would be formed between them both: he the strong, genial man, with the path of success marked so plainly in front of him, and she the graceful, lovable woman, whose sweetness seemed to breathe through the village as she went. If it was with an aching heart that the Vicar knew that the time was coming when he would be alone—for he was a widower—still he rejoiced in the thought that his daughter had found a man after his own heart—as well as hers.

John Lingwood paused for a moment to light his pipe, then slowly crossed the sluice and bent his way over the marshes beyond. A few minutes later another man came towards the sluice from the direction of the village, walking briskly. One had only to glance at him to tell exactly what he was—a fisherman. He was a little man, dressed in dark blue clothes, the sleeves of his guernsey rolled nearly up to his elbows, albeit the morning was so cold, a black handkerchief tied loosely round his throat, with the long ends blown about by the breeze. An old peaked cap set well on the back of his head did not by any means hide a wealth of sandy-red hair, which was continued down his cheeks and ended in a thick, massive-looking beard.

His eyes were as blue as the sky above him and twinkling merrily as he gazed over the landscape. He puffed away at a short black pipe and he looked the very picture of contented happiness, while his rough, horny hands, bent as if grasping an oar, showed plainly that his happiness had not been gained without much toil. He was a man of some fifty years of age, but so alert in tread and eye that he would have shamed many a young fellow half his years.

He paused, as Lingwood had done, when he reached the sluice, and gazed with genuine admiration over the marshes. He was a true child of nature and a philosopher, withal, was Harry Ward.

"What a lovely mornin' 'tis, to be sure," he muttered out loud. "But, there, the marsh is always a sight worth lookin' at, same as most things in God's earth. 'Tis a wonder how folks can ever shut 'emselves

up in towns, I say. I'll go and have a look at them withes yonder. They're most ready for cuttin', I'll 'low."

He alluded to an osier-bed some little distance off. Rundleham fishermen reaped their best harvest from prawns, and to catch them made those curious "prawn-pots" which are so characteristic of certain parts of the South Coast. The "withes" with which these pots are made are cut down by the fishermen just about Christmas, and they spend the first few months of the year in making a supply for the summer fishing season.

He crossed the sluice and proceeded across the marshes in a slightly different direction from that taken by the lawyer. He had not gone very far when he was startled by a loud cry:

"Hi! hi! I want you!"

He stopped and gazed in the direction of the cry.

"Why, 'tis Mister Lingwood," he ejaculated as he saw the lawyer standing in the midst of a cluster of reeds waving to him.

"Quick, man!"

"All right, sir, I be comin'"; and the little man started to run as fast as his legs could carry him.

"What's the matter, sir?" he asked as he drew near.

"Matter enough," replied John Lingwood, as he thrust aside the reeds. "Look here!"

"Why, 'tis a woman and a child," cried the astonished fisherman. "What be they a-doin' of, I wonder?"

"Poor thing!" said Lingwood; "we've found her too late. She's dead."

"Lord love us, sir. But the child ain't, anyway." For a cry came from the little bundle that lay by the side of the dead woman.

"No," said Lingwood, taking the child into his arms; "it was the child crying that attracted my notice. The woman must have been dead some hours. Poor thing! I suppose she lost her way in the marshes last night."

"Pretty dear!" said the fisherman gently—for the woman was young and fair to look upon—"she took off her shawl and her petticoat to keep the child warm, just like the mother as she was. Ain't there no way of findin' out who she is, sir? She's married. Look at her ring."

"We may find out who she was and how she came here by-and-by," replied the other; "but let's be quick and get this poor little thing seen to."

"Right, sir! Some of us folk 'll come and carry the mother in afterwards."

He fell on one knee for a moment by the side of the woman's body and reverently covered her face with his black handkerchief, quickly untying it for the purpose. As he rose he said:

"Why, her chest be bare, sir."

"Yes," said John Lingwood; "I undid her things to see if there was any warmth left in her, poor thing! But come along. I'll carry the child if you take my gun."

The two men strode back over the marshes towards the village as quickly as they could. Presently the child, which might have been about a year old, began to sob and cry. The lawyer did what he could to pacify it, but to no purpose.

"Let me take the poor child for a bit, sir," said the fisherman. "Maybe I'm more used to holding a young 'un. Come along, my dearie."

And he stretched out his arms and tenderly took the child, who nestled to his shoulder at once and ceased crying in a few minutes.

"'Tis but a knack of handlin' 'em, sir, that only comes to those as owns children themselves. Where be we goin' to take it?"

"Oh, I think we'd better go to the Vicarage at once."

"Couldn't do better, sir. Miss Margaret 'll know what to do, bless her dear heart!"

John Lingwood smiled approval of the other's sentiments, for he knew that flattery was an unknown quantity in the fisherman's composition. Very carefully the latter held the child as they crossed the old sluice with its black waters hissing beneath. A short walk through a couple of meadows brought them into the churchyard, which they had to cross to reach the private gate leading to the Vicarage. A sound of voices came from the open door of the church.

"Decoratin' for Christmas, I reckon," said the fisherman, jerking his head towards the door. "P'r'aps they're inside."

"No; here they are, just coming from the Vicarage. Good morning!"

Through the little gate into the church-

"'Have you come to help us in the decorations?'"

yard there came a silver-haired, tranquil-looking man, who held it open for the girl that followed — for both her arms were encompassing a huge bundle of holly, over which her sweet face smiled greeting to her betrothed. She was a tall, graceful woman of some two-and-twenty years, with lustrous brown eyes that sent a message from the pure soul within as they gazed upon you. There was a depth of meaning in those same eyes and the broad pale forehead above them, telling plainly that Margaret Kingslake not only possessed a poetical and artistic temperament, but the more sterling qualities of deep love and unflinching faith. It could be seen in the look she gave John Lingwood as he stepped towards her that he was the one man in the world who drew out these qualities in the extreme, the man who had gained her deepest love, and in whom, on the level of this lower world, her faith was centred.

"Why, John," she exclaimed, "have you come to help us in the decorations instead of waging war against the wild-fowl? But what is this? Whose child have you got there, Ward?"

A few words sufficed for explanation, and Margaret threw down the holly and rushed forward.

"Oh, how terrible!" she cried. "Give me the poor little child. It must be starving. Quick! Let us take it into the house and get some food for it."

"Are you sure nothing can be done for the poor mother?" asked the Vicar anxiously of Ward before he turned to follow his daughter and Lingwood.

"No, sir. She be quite stiff and cold," replied the fisherman. "I'd best see about bringing of her to the Crown, sir."

"Ay, do. I'll come over by-and-by and see her. But we must attend to the child now. Ah me, it's very sad, and at Christmas time too. But we should be thankful they were not both dead."

"P'r'aps 'tis the Lord had pity on the babe and only took the mother, rememberin' He was a babe Himself at Christmas-tide once, sir," said the simple fisherman. "'Tis likely we must look on it as a Christmas gift from Him if we can't find out nothin' more about it." And he set his face towards the village.

The Vicar walked back to the house with a moist eye, for he was a kindly man, and the griefs of others made themselves felt within him.

"I don't think there's much that we can do here," said John Lingwood, as the Vicar entered the hall. "Margaret and the cook have taken the case in hand and we must leave it with them."

"Yes, poor little thing. Now tell me all about it, John. I'm very anxious to know how it happened."

The lawyer explained at more length how he had found the dead mother and her child.

"I hope we shall find out who she was," said the Vicar.

"That remains to be seen," replied Lingwood.

"There were no signs of violence?"

"None that I could see. The inquest will satisfy that point."

"True. Of course there will have to be one. I wonder if the child has friends. If not——"

"If not, of course there is only one thing to be done, I suppose."

"And that?"

"It will be a case for the guardians."

"Ah, the workhouse, you mean?"

"Exactly."

The Vicar found himself repeating the words of the fisherman: "'Tis likely we must look on it as a Christmas gift from the Lord." "Oh," he said aloud, "I trust it won't come to that. Perhaps some other home may be found. But now I really must go over to the church and see to the decorations."

"I'll come too. My shooting's spoilt for the morning."

A little later a sad procession approached the Crown Inn. The report of what had happened had spread, and the villagers had gathered in the straggling street. It was no strange sight for them this bearing of a body on the shoulders of half-a-dozen stalwart fishermen. There is a harvest of the sea that foretells, in a manner, the great consummation of all things, and now and then the sea gave up its dead on the low-lying Rundleham beach. It gave up the body of some toiler on its bosom whom they all knew and whom they all followed into the quiet churchyard. It gave up the unknown dead, washed ashore from some ill-fated vessel that met her doom where the breakers showed white on the sharp rocks, and laid to rest in a certain corner of God's-acre to add one more to that row of grassy mounds that marked the sleeping-places of this sad, unknown harvest of the sea.

The Vicar and his future son-in-law repaired presently to the inn. There was nothing to be learned. A purse with a couple of shillings and a few coppers was all that was found in the pocket of the woman.

"Poor child!" sighed the Vicar as they gazed upon her, "she is quite young. Yet see the suffering written in her face! And how thin she is! She must have been not far from death even before she was lost on the marshes."

John Lingwood stood by and said nothing. He was a strong man, and the great, still Presence did not move him as it did the other.

They came out of the inn and went back to the Vicarage to lunch. Margaret greeted them with a pleased smile.

"I think the poor little thing will be all right, father. She had been well wrapped up and has not suffered much from the cold. But she was hungry. She's sleeping soundly now."

"A girl, is it?" said Lingwood.

"Yes, dear. We examined her clothes, but there is no name on them."

"What shall you do with her?"

"Oh," said the Vicar, "she shall remain here for the present. We can't do anything until the inquest has been held."

"And now," said Margaret, "let us make haste and have our lunch. You know I have to practise this afternoon for to-morrow's services. Thank you, John dear, for helping with the decorations. And thank God for sending you to the rescue of that poor child."

She hurried to the church as soon as lunch was over. John Lingwood stayed to smoke a pipe in the Vicar's study and sat talking with him for some time. Then he rose to go.

"We shall see you to-morrow, I suppose, John?" said the old man, as he shook hands with him.

"Of course. I'll come over as early as possible—in time for church first."

"That's right. We shall have a quiet Christmas, you know. And there is always sadness to me now at Christmastide. We old men miss those companions who have gone before at such a time as this. And—

and—I shall be still more lonely in the Christmases to come," said the Vicar pathetically.

"We shall always try and spend them with you," replied John.

"Of course you will, my boy. Of course you will. It was very selfish of me to say what I did. And yet I ought to be thankful, for I know Margaret will have a good husband."

"I shall try to be one to her, sir."

"I am sure of it. And she will make you the only wife worth having, for she loves you with all her heart. That is more than wealth, John, and wealth is not mine to bestow with her."

"Don't talk about that, I must make both our fortunes," laughed John Lingwood.

"Yes; but don't centre your affections too much on fortunes, John. But there, I think I know you better. Good-bye."

The young man bent his way through the little gate into the churchyard and approached the door of the church. He stopped for a moment before he entered. The organ was pealing forth in joyous strains. Quietly he stepped inside. The winter afternoon was beginning to fade, but he could see the girl as she sat in the dim light of the chancel. Softly he approached and stood behind her until she had finished. It was a voluntary she was playing. The music lay before her unheeded and unturned. Her face glowed with a gladsome light as the organ responded to her touch. It seemed a burst of joy that resounded through the oaken rafters of the roof, culminating at last in a soft, far-away melody, that died away in cadences of Christmas peace. She finished, and he stooped to kiss her.

"I knew you were there, dearest," she said, laying her hand upon his. "I was playing for you. I can tell you just what I feel about you so."

"And I, darling, have little music in me, yet I love to hear you."

"Yes? You understood, then?"

"Something, perhaps. Tell me what I did not."

"It was all joy and peace, John. I ought to be sad after this terrible thing that has happened, but somehow Christmas—and you, dear—drown the sadness altogether."

"As every Christmas will, I hope, dear, through our lives. And we shall often come here and you shall play the organ to me, and still tell me the old message."

"John," she said suddenly, turning to him, "you don't know how much I love this place. It is the sweetest spot on earth to me, and if it had not been for you I don't think I could ever have left it."

He smiled.

"Ah well," he answered, "Burchester is only six miles away. And I suppose we shall live there all our lives."

"And I am very glad of it; aren't you, dear?"

"And yet," he said musingly, "it is a very dull place—if it were not for the shooting—and you, love," he added, as he caught a slightly pained expression on her face, "and no place could ever be dull with you to share it with me. Good-bye, darling, I must hurry back, for I have some work to do to-night."

"You sordid man," she said smilingly as she kissed him good-bye; "but there, I mustn't always be up in the clouds, must I? Come as early as you can to-morrow to wish me a happy Christmas."

She watched him as he walked down the aisle, turning to wave his hand at the west door. Then she busied herself in finding out the places in the choir-books, and the lessons for the next day's service.

"How peaceful it all seems, this Christmastide!" she murmured as she turned over the leaves of the lectern Bible. "Is it because Christ is the Prince of Peace?"

As she asked the question her eyes fell upon a text that flashed from the moving leaves.

"I am not come to bring peace on earth, but a sword."

"Ah," she sighed, "I must not forget others in my happiness. Poor, poor mother! How she loved her little child. And mine were the first woman's arms that nursed it after hers. Strange that it should be carried from one so wretched to one so happy! It seems almost a trust."

She finished her work and hurried back to the Vicarage to see after the little stranger. Later on in the evening Harry Ward called at the kitchen-door to ask after the child. Margaret went to see him and told him the news was good.

"Poor little babe," he said. "I wonder if she'll ever find a mother to care for her.

'Tis a sad thing for a child to grow up without one, miss. Worse than losin' a father, almost."

"We must find her a mother somehow."

"Ay, that we must. I couldn't a-bear to think of her bein' brought up in the work'us. But maybe there's friends. If there ain't, I'd ask my old woman to take the child herself, sooner nor she should be cast away like. Good-night, miss. A happy Christmas."

"The same to you, Ward."

"Thankee. That goes without sayin'. Christmas or no Christmas, I'm allus just as happy as a sandboy, miss. My missus gets laughin' at me sometimes for it. But what's the use o' grumblin? I wouldn't be nothin' else than I am, no, not if you wor to make me Emp'ror o' Roosia."

"You wouldn't be so happy then," laughed the girl.

"Oh, I knows I wouldn't. Good-night, miss!"

As he left the house the first peal of Christmas Eve rang out from the village church.

"Hark at 'em," said the happy little man to himself; "don't they seem to speak like? It makes you want to sing."

And he did burst forth into song too, as he walked along, a snatch of an old sea ditty:

Hurrah, my lads, we're homeward bound,
All wind and weather scorning,
Our ship sails free o'er the rolling sea,
We'll be home by Christmas morning.

"Blowed if I don't give the missus a carol. She'll think it's the Waits," he chuckled as he reached his little cottage. So he went close up to the window and began:

Hurrah, my lads, we're homeward bound,
All wind and weather——

"Come in, you silly old man," cried his wife, opening the door and gazing at the "Wait" with no small admiration, for it was a well-known fact that Mrs. Ward admired her husband emphatically. "Don't stand out there in the cold with your foolishness."

"All right, missus!"

Our ship sails free o'er the rolling sea,
We'll be home by Christmas morning.

And he caught her round the waist and waltzed her into the kitchen, right into the middle of it, beneath the little branch of mistletoe which hung to the beam. "There's a kiss for you, old girl!"

The cat jumped out of the chair at the smack thereof.

"Take your nasty great beard out of my eyes," cried Mrs. Ward as she wrenched herself free and sank into the vacated chair, roaring with laughter at him, "and eat your supper like a Christian,"

For Christmas time it brings good cheer,
A round of beef and a barrel of beer,

sang the irrepressible little man in reply as he danced a hornpipe in great glee for the sole edification of his "missus."

Meanwhile John Lingwood had mounted his horse and had ridden home, leaving his gun, as usual, at the Crown Inn. It was quite dark when he arrived at Burchester and rode through the streets of the sleepy old town. He gave his horse over to his groom and entered his dingy house at the side door.

Later on that evening, after his solitary dinner, John Lingwood went to his office. It was really a room in his house. In fact the two clerks' offices, the waiting-room, and his own private sanctum formed the ground-floor, and the living rooms were upstairs. It was a dim, uncompromising-looking abode, this sanctum of his, with its old furniture, its piles of tin boxes with clients' names in white, and its musty smell of papers. Even the old cuckoo clock in the corner had grown hoarse with the dust of years, and the bird uttered his note with a husky sound followed by a grating "whir" and a banging of his little door. On one side of the room was a large iron safe let into the wall, and painted a gruesome green.

He lit the gas, sat down at his desk, wrote a few letters, and then leaned back in his chair. A slow, thoughtful man was John Lingwood when in that office, not the quick shot or fast bowler of the outside world of sport. Presently he put his hand into the inner pocket of his shooting-coat—for he had not changed for dinner—and drew forth a large dirty envelope. This he opened and spread the contents, a packet of papers, before him.

He glanced at them casually at first. Suddenly he uttered an exclamation of

profound surprise. Over and over again he read those papers through, but not a muscle of his face changed. Then he lit his pipe and leaned back in his chair again thoughtfully.

Pipe after pipe he smoked that night, thinking, thinking long and deeply, calm and impassive. Once or twice he bent forward to read the papers again. Far into the hours of Christmas Eve he sat, his eyes set, his lips sometimes parting with a slight smile.

Suddenly there rang out the church bells. Christmas had come, and the chimes floated sweetly on the wind, as the voices of angels from above—a call to the heights.

And then came a harsh, grating, discordant sound. "Coo—koo—G-r-r-r-r, Coo—koo—G-r-r-r-r" twelve times. "Slap, bang!" as the little door shut with a sharp, decisive sound, reminding one of a little devil shutting up the human heart lest it should hear the angels' bells.

John Lingwood reached forward, collected the papers, put them in a clean envelope, which he carefully labelled, unlocked his safe, and deposited the packet therein, turning the key on it. Then he went to bed.

CHAPTER II

CHRISTMAS DAY dawned bright and sunny. John Lingwood rode over to Rundleham as he had promised, in time for church. Naturally his first question after the Christmas greetings was about the child.

"Oh, she's just bonny," said Margaret. "Wait a minute and I'll run and fetch her. There's just time for her to wish her rescuer a happy Christmas before we start for church."

She brought her into the room, laughing as she did so.

"There, dearie! That's the good, kind fairy that found the Princess in the marshes and brought her to the palace. Isn't he a big man? Wave your hand at him and thank him. John dear, give the little mite a kiss."

As he stooped over the child to kiss her the baby reached out both her arms towards him.

"Oh, isn't she sweet? She wants you to take her, John."

The lawyer took her, somewhat awkwardly. She nestled to him for a moment, and then burst out crying.

"Oh, fie! that won't do at all!" said the Vicar.

"Give her back to me, John! There—there—don't cry, little one!"

For the baby had laid its head down on her shoulder, hiding its face from John Lingwood, and was sobbing bitterly.

"Come," said the Vicar, "it's time we started."

Margaret deposited the child in charge of Ellen, one of the servants, and the little party went to church.

Rundleham Church had never been touched inside by the hand of the modern "restorer," as he calls himself. The old high-backed pews and bricked floor might not have satisfied the inartistic eye of the latter-day church architect or "correct" vicar, but Mr. Kingslake would not for the world have had one panel or one brick altered.

"My church," he once said to some busybody who suggested restoration to him, "is the home of the simple fisherfolk, who love it for the sake of their forefathers and the old associations. I would not educate their love in other channels. We are simple, out-of-the-world people here. We love our own particular nooks and corners as we love the old faith. If, for example, you were to take away that row of hat-pegs you say is so ugly, poor Harry Ward would be sadly discomforted for one. The hats of many generations of Wards have hung thereon. It may seem a little thing, but your so-called 'restoration' shall not come in my time."

There was one prodigious pew in the church. It was a complete gallery all to itself, with its own particular staircase leading up to it. It stretched between two pillars on the north side and contained half-a-dozen chairs and a small stove. Indeed, it was just like a huge opera-box, only instead of opera-glasses there rested upon the red-velveted shelf in front of it a great Bible and some equally large prayer and hymn books, which were carefully dusted by the clerk every Sunday morning.

Seated in this pew, in solitary state and loneliness, was a man who would have attracted one's attention directly one entered the church if one's eye had happened to

light upon him. A tall, upright man, with a stern, seared face, short iron-grey hair and a grizzled moustache, thin, compressed lips, and eyes that seemed to keep all the world at a distance. He sat there, waiting for the service to begin, back in the shadow of the enormous pew, gazing steadily in front of him at the row of diamond-shaped hatchments bearing the legend "Resurgam" which hung high up on the opposite wall, gazing with a grim look as though he took them for personal messages from the departed members of his own family, whose arms they had been.

A stranger whose curiosity had been roused, leading him to inquire who the man was, would have been told by any Rundleham villager that his name was Colonel Carr-Mathers, that he was the sole owner and occupant of Rundleham Court, the big house standing just on the outskirts of the village, and that many hundred acres of land lying between Rundleham and Burchester, and let to sundry farmers, were also his property. He might further have been told that the Colonel was reputed to be immensely rich, that he was a Justice of the Peace and a member of the Board of Guardians. The stranger also might have learned that he had been a widower for many years, but Rundleham folk were always uncommunicative over mere private matters to the outside world, and here the stranger's curiosity would probably have had to rest content.

Colonel Carr-Mathers was waiting in the churchyard after the service to greet the Vicarage party. He wished them, very stiffly, a happy Christmas, to which the Vicar and John Lingwood replied with the "Compliments of the season." But Margaret looked straight at him, and said gently:

"The same to you, Colonel."

"Thank you," he replied, drawing himself up very rigidly; "but all times and seasons are more or less alike to me—and bring no special meaning. But what are these rumours that I hear, Vicar, about a tragedy that took place yesterday on the marshes?"

The Vicar told him the story in a few simple words.

"And when is the inquest?"

"To-morrow, I think."

"Ah! What have you done with the child?"

"At present we are taking care of her in the Vicarage."

"Of course she cannot remain there. It seems that I shall probably be called upon to assist in the matter."

"You, Colonel?" asked the lawyer.

"Yes; I am a member of the Board of Guardians."

"Ah, to be sure."

"Indeed," said Margaret rather hotly. "I hope the case will not have to come before you at all."

"Oh, if there are friends, of course it won't; but if not, it's hardly likely that any one will care to burden themselves with a stray child—a pauper. Good morning, Vicar; good morning, Miss Kingslake. Ah, by the way, Lingwood, I wish you could make it convenient to come and see me soon. I want your advice about that lease with Thomas Gatward."

"I'll call to-morrow. I shall have to be at the inquest."

"Very well. Good morning."

The inquest was held at the Crown Inn the following day. There were three witnesses, one more than had at first been calculated on. First John Lingwood gave his plain, blunt version of the case, telling how he had been attracted by the cry of the child to look within the little clump of reeds; then came Harry Ward with his simple, corroborative evidence, and lastly a ticket-collector from Burchester Station, whose curiosity on hearing of the case had induced him to walk over to Rundleham on Christmas afternoon and view the body. His evidence amounted to this:

He recognised the body as that of a woman who had got out of the down train at Burchester late in the evening of the day before the discovery on the marshes. On giving up her ticket, which he had noticed was from London, she had asked him the distance to Rundleham and the best way to get there. On his telling her that she might yet catch the carrier if she hurried she had shaken her head and replied that she could not afford to drive there, so he had directed her as well as he could how to walk. The only other question she had asked was whether she could get a cheap lodging in the village, and he had told her he thought she could. He had noticed that she seemed very weak and ill and was troubled with a bad

cough. She appeared to possess no luggage, and was carrying a child.

The jury, who were all local men, unanimously agreed that the woman must have made a very simple mistake and taken the wrong road about a mile before reaching the village. This would lead her, over a little bridge crossing the "rife," out upon the marshes, and once there, being evidently a stranger, and the night being dark, it was only too easy a matter for her to get hopelessly lost.

"Boy and man I've lived all my life here," said the foreman, "but I'll 'low 'twould be none too easy even for me to pick my way 'cross them marshes when 'tis dark and stormy like 'twas that night; let alone this poor creature, who know'd nought about 'em."

A verdict was returned accordingly, and the coroner signed an order for the burial of "A woman, unknown." For not a shred of evidence as to her identity was forthcoming.

Before John Lingwood started for the inquest he had unlocked the largest tin box which his office contained, a box bearing the inscription "Colonel Carr-Mathers." Out of the many bulky papers within it the lawyer drew the lease which the Colonel had mentioned and put it in his pocket. As soon as the inquest was over he repaired to Rundleham Court.

Rundleham Court was a large white house of two storeys, standing in extensive grounds, and half hidden by trees from the outside world. There was an air of desolation about the bare wintry lawn and the stone terrace which ran along the full width of the mansion. Precise, straight curtains showed through the windows, adding to the general effect of stiffness. John Lingwood paused as he walked up the curving road from the lodge-gates. He looked at the house, he gave a sweeping glance round the grounds, and for just one moment a glow came into his fresh, honest-looking face.

The door was opened by a silent and respectful butler, who led the lawyer from the hall, through a long passage hung with family portraits and containing a grim row of oak chairs, to the Colonel's study. The latter was waiting to receive him, stiff and impassive as he always was.

Quietly and methodically John Lingwood went through the several points of the lease, advising or noting the instructions of his client. When he had finished he paused for a moment before taking his leave.

"Is that inquest over?" asked the Colonel.

"Yes."

"And what was the verdict?"

"'Death from exposure.' It was a very simple case."

"Any identity established?"

"None."

"No friends?"

"No."

"Ah! Then the guardians will have to see to the child. It's hard for the rates to be burdened by outside paupers, I think."

"Perhaps somebody will adopt it."

"Eh? I should scarcely imagine anybody will be so foolish."

"Oh, I don't know, Colonel."

"Adopt an unknown child! Ten to one it would turn against the hand that nourished it, like a viper. It's a way children have," snarled the Colonel bitterly.

"Well, we shall see," replied Lingwood, drawing on his gloves as he rose to go.

"By the way," said the Colonel, "there was another little matter on which I intended to speak to you."

"Yes?"

"I suppose one of these days I ought to be making my will."

The lawyer slowly sat down again in his chair without a word, and the Colonel went on:

"It's hard for me to know, after all the years my family have owned Rundleham Court, that I am the last of the line—with neither kith nor kin to my name."

"True," replied Lingwood slowly. "Your son is dead."

"He is; and if he were not he would be dead to me," snapped the other viciously. "And I've been thinking lately that, if anything happened to me, and I died intestate, the whole estate would go to the Crown, eh?"

"It would go to the Crown."

"And the Crown's got enough already. I've got a scheme or two in my head, Lingwood, and by-and-by I shall give you instructions. There's no hurry for a few months."

"Oh, there's no hurry," laughed John Lingwood. "You're sound enough for a couple of score of years yet, Colonel."

"Thank you," he answered grimly; "but

I've no wish to live to be a doddering old idiot of ninety-two. Life isn't so valuable to me. Well, we'll see about the will another day."

John Lingwood was very silent when he paid a call at the Vicarage half an hour later.

"What's the matter with you, dear?" asked Margaret.

"Eh? Oh, nothing. How's the little kid?"

"I won't have the dear child called names. She's sweeter than ever."

"Is she going to stay here for a day or two till something is settled?"

"Yes — and — and, John dear, I've been talking it over with father, and I think she'll never leave the Vicarage."

"Oh?"

"They say that nothing fills the vacant corner of an old man's heart like a little child, and—and, you know, after awhile he'll be alone."

John scarcely noticed the allusion.

"So your father's going to adopt her, is he?"

"Perhaps. Don't you think it's the best thing, John?"

"I don't know, dear; I must think it over. And now, to change the subject, I have to go away for a week or so, on business."

"Oh, must you? Write often, dear, won't you?"

"Of course I will, and come and see my own dear Margaret directly I return."

He did not glance back as usual from the gate when he left the Vicarage. Margaret stood at the door watching him.

"Poor John," she murmured, "how he loves to work for me, to make me a home! He's always thinking of me!"

But John Lingwood was not thinking of her as he rode to Burchester, for the sweet vision of Margaret Kingslake never raised a frown to a man's brow nor made him mutter an oath; but perhaps it was because his horse stumbled.

"'There's no hurry. You're sound enough for a couple of score of years yet'"

The next day there was a sad little funeral in the quiet churchyard, and one more grassy mound was added to the row of unknown graves.

"Poor thing!" said Harry Ward to Margaret after it was over, for both of them had attended the service. "There's a many I've seen laid to rest in that 'ere corner with no one to tell who they was. But maybe there's some one up in the many mansions to call 'em by their names, miss."

"Yes; let us trust she has been welcomed there by some one she loved here."

"And even if she ain't," replied the fisherman, "she's smilin' to know her babe's found a home. 'Twas good of the Vicar, miss."

"You'd have done it yourself, Harry—you said so."

"Ay, and meant it. And for all the

missus called me a foolish old idjut—she wor of the same mind. But what are you going to call the poor little thing, miss? I was a-thinkin' as how she ought to have a name that 'ud fit in with the time as we found her. Something to do with Christmas. Can't we call her Eliza Christmas? Eliza's the prettiest name I knows, beggin' your pardon, miss; it belongs to my missus."

Margaret Kingslake laughed.

"My father and I have been talking it over," she said, "and, though we haven't chosen the name you've thought of, it means the same thing. We're going to call her Bertha Noel."

Harry Ward looked puzzled.

"I should ha' liked it to be something about Christmas," he said.

"So it is. Bertha is the name of my little sister who died when she was a baby, and Noel is French for Christmas."

"'Taint so good as plain English to my mind. But then I never could a-bear nothin' Frenchified; but you and the Vicar knows best, miss, and 'tis not for me to say."

So from that day forth the waif was known as Bertha Noel.

A little over a week passed, and John Lingwood returned home and paid a visit to Rundleham. It was a beautiful afternoon; the frost still held, and the sea sparkled in the clear sunlight as he and Margaret walked down to the shore.

"See how the waves dance and smile," she said. "The sea is just brimful of happiness, and so am I!"

"And what makes you so happy?" he asked, with just the vestige of a smile. Margaret's similes always rather amused him, for he had little poetry in his composition.

"Well, of course, you have come back, haven't you? The sea will be sad and lone when the sun sets, but to-morrow—when he comes again—the smiles will begin. I'm always happy with you, dear."

The fresh, frosty air had brought a glow to her cheeks as she looked up into his face.

"I always love to hear that little ripple on the shingles," she went on. "Don't you remember how the little waves splashed up and sang to us that day last summer, when——"

"When I screwed up my courage to put the momentous question, eh?" said her companion with a laugh.

"John, you haven't a scrap of poetry in you," replied the girl, smiling at him. "Now don't say you are sorry, because I love you just as you are, you great, blunt man, and I would not alter you for the world. You can't help it, can you, dear?"

John Lingwood lit his pipe and puffed away complacently.

"And I'll tell you another thing why I am feeling happy," Margaret continued; "it's because of that poor little Christmas waif. I think God sent her to us to take care of, and I'm so glad about it."

"Now I've got a proposal to make about that child," said Lingwood in his blunt manner, taking his pipe out of his mouth as he spoke. "I don't think it's fair that your father should be burdened with her. I found her, you know, and if any one ought to take the responsibility it's myself."

"I don't understand you," said Margaret.

"Well, I mean I should like to adopt the poor little thing myself."

"You, John? Oh, it's very good of you. It's just like your kind heart, dear, but we've settled everything now. Besides, how could you manage it?"

"I don't exactly intend to act as a nurse," he said, with a broad grin on his face, "but my housekeeper's an excellent person and would look after her."

"But——"

"Hear me out, Margaret. Why should your father undertake all the expense it means? How about her education in a few years' time? It is not fair on an old man, as he is getting. I've been thinking over it a great deal. It would have gone to my heart to have seen the child sent to the workhouse. Can't you understand that, because I found her, I look upon this thing as a duty? Let me have the child and bring her up."

"John, you shall not. It's very, very kind of you, and I shall never forget your thoughtfulness. But father will be alone soon—in a few years, I suppose. It has always troubled me when I have thought of leaving him, but now God seems to have sent this Christmas gift so that he may not be alone. Don't—please don't—speak of it again."

They were walking close to the edge of the sea. John Lingwood picked up a stone and threw it into the water with an impatient action.

"This is all very well," he said, "but do look at matters sensibly as well as sentimentally. Your father is a poor man—forgive me for saying so—and I, well, I'm not exactly rich, but I'm making progress. Believe me, it will be for the best. Let me talk it over with your father when we get back."

"John," she said, with a flash of her eyes that was strange to him, "the child shall not leave the Vicarage. I wonder that you should press the point like this."

"It would not be taking her away from you, darling. By-and-by you could be a mother to her."

"She needs a mother most now, and she shall have one. Dear heart, I know you mean it well, but I will have my way in this matter."

"Don't be upset, dear," he said with a laugh. "Think it over, and——"

"I have made up my mind, and I shall not change it."

"But what if I say I have a right to the child?" he answered in his bluntest manner.

"A right to the child?" she echoed, stopping short in her walk and striking the umbrella she carried into the shingle. "Why do you talk like this, John? Do you mean that you would take her from us against our wish; that you would put some of the machinery of your law in motion against my father and myself? Is it fair to talk to me like this? O John, where is your love for me if you would thwart this simple wish and seek to deny my father this little happiness?"

He saw that he had gone too far.

"Dearest girl," he said, "I was only joking. You know I wouldn't do anything to hurt your feelings. I only wanted to attempt what I thought was the best thing."

She took his arm after they had walked on for a few paces.

"Forgive me, dear," she said, "for losing my temper. I know your kindness and devotion. But it did seem, just for a minute, that you were speaking strangely."

"All right," he answered; "I won't say anything more about it."

When the lawyer had gone home Margaret told her father of his offer.

"How very kind of him," said he, "but we will not let the little girl leave us. You told him so?"

"Of course I did, father. You don't want to go away, do you, dearie?"

The child, whom she was holding, looked up at her and crowed.

"Now you shall sit on father's knee for a treat. There you are! Oh, what a picture you two make! You dear old dad, you *have* got a Christmas-box, haven't you?"

And the little thing crowed again with delight as the Vicar gravely dandled her upon his knee, and smiled upon her, such a quiet, fatherly smile. Surely the good God had sent him a little recompense for the daughter who was going to leave him. Ah yes! When loneliness begins to gather round white hairs few things fill the vacant corners of an old man's heart as does a child. Margaret was right.

As she stood that night at her window, looking across the distant marshes, over which the moon was shining brightly, a shiver ran through her.

"How terrible," she murmured, "to die out there in cold and loneliness, and not to know what was to become of her loved one! How awful to have to leave her darling so!"

As she turned her eyes lit on the portrait of John Lingwood, standing on her table. She took it into her hands.

"I do love you so," she said gently. "God grant that I may be a wife worthy of you. Poor John! I was angry with you for a moment to-day. And he did speak so strangely," she went on thoughtfully. "I never knew him in such a mood before. How anxious he seemed to take Bertha under his wing. I wonder why? Oh, it is foolish of me to think thus; and I lost my temper too. Good-night, dear one! You have brought such joy into my life, and I could not do without you."

At that very moment John Lingwood was seated in his sanctum, and the door of his safe stood open. The packet of papers which he had studied so attentively on Christmas Eve lay on the table before him, and he was glancing through one or two other documents. Presently he folded them up and put them into the large envelope among the rest. He added something to the wording outside this envelope, carefully blotted it, and put it back into the safe. When he retired for the night he, too, gazed at a photograph which stood in his room.

"Sweet Margaret, you have a strong

will!" he murmured with a smile, "and you have thwarted me to-day. Never mind!"

A week or two later Colonel Carr-Mathers drove into Burchester in his dog-cart and alighted at the lawyer's door. He was shown at once into the inner office.

"Ah, Lingwood," he said, "I've been thinking over our little talk of the other day, and it seems to me that I may as well get that will of mine drawn up at once. One never knows what may happen."

"You're in a mighty hurry, Colonel," laughed the lawyer. "Sometimes I find it quite a difficult matter to bring clients up to the scratch when there isn't any time to be lost. But let us get to business by all means."

"It will be a fairly simple will," said the Colonel. "I do not intend to leave any single individual anything."

"Not even your servants?"

"Certainly not. They are paid their wages, and that is sufficient. I can't bear the thought that the man who folds up my clothes does so with the idea that he's going to get more out of it than it's worth. Besides, servants are an ungrateful lot, worse than children sometimes, and that's saying a good deal," he said bitterly.

"Well, what do you think of doing?"

"I wish everything to be sold at my death, and the whole of the proceeds given to this list of charities in equal divisions. I've chosen them carefully, because they're about the most harmless I can find. You'll see that I include a couple of local institutions, so Burchester won't curse my memory. The money has to be left somehow, and this is as good a way as any."

"Nothing to your tenants?"

"Not a halfpenny. Nor to you either, Lingwood. You'll have to be content with what you get out of me while I'm alive, and that's a fair slice."

He grinned sardonically at the lawyer, who was taking notes.

"I want you to be my executor, because you're a good man of business. And you'll just see that I'm buried without any fuss or show; d'ye see?"

Lingwood nodded. He knew from experience that it was no use trying to coerce this misanthrope of a colonel.

"There, that's about all, I think."

The lawyer asked a few pertinent questions and finally said he understood his instructions completely.

"Good. When will it be ready for signing?"

"When are you coming in again?"

"Next week. Tuesday or Wednesday."

"It shall be quite ready then."

"Witnesses?"

"Don't trouble. A couple of my clerks will be all that is necessary."

"Very well. By the way, our Vicar is more of a soft-hearted fool than I took him for."

"Why?"

"He's adopted that child you picked up on the marshes. You'd have done him a service if you'd left it there, Lingwood. He'll live to repent it."

"He'll be an old man if he lives till then."

"If he doesn't his daughter will; and as you're going to marry her it's probable that you'll be saddled with the child. In that case you'll repent it. Take my advice, and have a clause put in the marriage settlement washing your hands of the whole business."

John Lingwood laughed heartily.

"We haven't all got such a poor opinion of human nature as you have, Colonel," he said.

"You haven't got so much cause to as I have, young man," snapped the other. "But very likely you'll live to yet. Life's all rosy coloured to you just now. Time's brush will daub all that sort of thing out in a few years. Though you might do worse, mind you, Lingwood, for Margaret Kingslake is one of the few people on this God-forsaken earth for whom I have any respect. Good morning. Mind you have that will ready."

The following Wednesday the document was spread out before the Colonel in Lingwood's private office. He read it through carefully and gave a grunt of satisfaction.

"That's all right, Lingwood. Bring in your witnesses."

Lingwood touched the bell and the two clerks entered. They stood demurely by the Colonel while he signed the will, put their own signatures thereto in a businesslike fashion, and left the room.

Colonel Carr-Mathers lingered for a few minutes while the lawyer folded up the document and tied it round with the customary red tape.

"I suppose you would like me to take

charge of it, with all the papers relating to the estate?" he asked casually, opening the large "Carr-Mathers" box as he did so.

"Certainly," said the Colonel. "I don't want to see it again."

"Oh, people change their minds sometimes," said Lingwood, smiling at his client.

"You've never caught me doing such a thing yet, have you?"

"I can't say I have."

"And you never will. Good morning, Lingwood."

The latter accompanied him to the street door and then returned to his sanctum. He took up the will and held it in his hand for several minutes, lost in thought. At length he put it into the deed-box, which he locked and replaced in its corner.

"I don't think it will matter much," he murmured. "What a hearty man the Colonel is! Strange that he should have been in such a hurry."

There was an ancient looking-glass over the dingy office mantelpiece. Presently the lawyer rose and congratulated himself therein.

"You're a young man, John Lingwood," he said, apostrophising his reflection, "and you ought to have success in front of you in more ways than one. At all events, you will have plenty of time to prepare for it!"

CHAPTER III

THE months had passed quickly round and the summer had come. Rundleham Marshes looked fresh and green in the warm July sunshine, and even the sluggish "rife" was a thing of beauty, its many windings marked by the thick rushes along its banks with the golden iris growing amid them. Over the broad expanse of shingles between the marshes and the water's edge the air was shivering with the radiation from the hot stones. Even these shingles were not bare or destitute of verdure, for above high-water mark there gleamed bright patches of yellow poppies and tufts of sea-pinks.

It was a busy season with the fisher-folk of Rundleham. Early, very early, on those summer mornings they left their cottages in the village and came down to the seashore. Long before the sun rose from the broad waters they were plying their heavy oars far out to sea, hauling their pots, "shooting" their hooks, and gathering their scaly harvest. Long ere, elsewhere, the lazy world of fashion crept downstairs with blinking eyes to breakfast they trudged up again from the beach, laden with spoil, and rested for awhile to break their fast. And all day long they toiled, sometimes on sea, sometimes on shore—for there were lobworms to be dug out of the sands at low tide, there were scores of hooks to be baited and prawn-pots to be mended before they put to sea once more in the evening. And often, in those lazy summer days, the sun went down an hour before the bow of their returning boat grated on the shingles, and they dragged their weary footsteps home. Truly these men of Saxon descent were men of toil; but without boasting. They went and came, quietly and simply, and laid them down in peace at night to take their brief rest.

The happiest of them all was Harry Ward, and perhaps he worked the hardest of the little community—he and his brother Tom. For they were partners in the same boat, and had been from boyhood almost. Tom was just the reverse of his brother, a silent, sad-looking man, with dreamy blue eyes and a fair, yellow beard, seldom speaking, but when he did so it was with such a soft, gentle voice, that if you had shut your eyes you would have imagined it was a woman who was addressing you.

They were sitting on the beach, these two. Tom was "snooding" hooks and his brother was baiting his lines, deftly twisting the big worms on to the hooks and coiling up the long line in an old butter-tub that stood between his outstretched legs. Tom's eyes were bent upon his work, but Harry Ward was for ever glancing around. Nothing escaped him in the great calm world of nature in which he moved and had his being.

"I'll 'low 'twill blow before night, Tom," he said presently. "Look how that sand twists in th' breeze."

A little spiral whirl of dry white sand rose just for a minute, and the fishermen knew its meaning.

Tom raised his head for a moment, but said nothing.

"But 't won't be much," went on Harry; "most likely 't will be over by mornin'. We'll shoot the lines all th' same."

"Ay."

"Hullo," continued his brother, "here be Miss Margaret and the little 'un a-comin' down. Good mornin', miss," he added as Margaret Kingslake approached, carrying Bertha in her arms.

"Good morning to you both. Busy, as usual, I see?"

"We be, miss. Keepin' ourselves out o' mischief like. Lor', how she do grow, to be sure! Don't she, Tom?"

"Ay," murmured Tom, glancing at the child as Margaret sat down on the beach beside them. "She's a-growin' fine, ain't she?"

"To think as how we picked her off the marshes!" ejaculated Harry. "Don't seem as if 'twere true; do it, miss?"

"No, indeed; she's quite one of the family now; aren't you, dearie? Do you want to go to him?"

For little Bertha had stretched out her hands towards the red-bearded fisherman.

"Lord love her," said the man as he put down his work and moved closer to Margaret. "Come along then. 'Tain't the first time I've handled her; be it, miss? All right, she ain't doin' no harm. She can't pull none of it out," he added, as the child seized his great beard and tugged at it with all her might.

"Ain't it a big 'un, ducky," he grinned. "My missus says 'tis lucky I've got such a beard."

"'Good morning to you both. Busy, as usual, I see'"

"Why?" asked Margaret with a smile.

"'Cause she says 'tis the handsomest thing about me and hides my ugly face. Ha! ha! ha!"

He chuckled over his little joke and played with the child for a few minutes. Margaret watched him with keen enjoyment.

"Mrs. Ward can't say you're not a cheerful husband, at all events," she said.

"No, miss; for all she's my second wife we're real fond of each other, and I wouldn't be without her, not, not if all the stones on this here beach was to turn into gold and I could have 'em instead. She's a good woman, miss. Though," he added in a softer tone, as a sad expression stole into his eyes, "time was when I thought there'd be no more happiness for me."

"When your first wife died?"

"Ay, miss. We'd only been married a year. 'Twas cruel hard to

lose her; ay, 'twas cruel hard, and I had to suffer for it, God knows."

"Yes," said the girl, "it is always terrible to lose those we love."

"But I'd rather ha' loved her and lost her than never to ha' met with her at all," replied the fisherman, unconsciously echoing one of the most lovely of Tennyson's thoughts; "and though it took all the heart out o' me for the time it ain't made no less a man of me. Miss Marg'ret," he added, putting the child down on the shingles and standing up, "I'll tell 'ee this. I've learned a hard lesson, but if I was to live my fifty-one years o' life over again there's not a single day as I'd have altered, for I knows now 'twas all for the best. What d'ye think o' that?"

There was a light of trust and faith in the eyes of that simple fisherman as he said these words that many a deep philosopher would have envied, or perhaps scoffed at.

"What do I think of it?" echoed a voice before Margaret could reply. "Why, I think you're more or less of a simpleton, Ward. At the same time I congratulate you that you haven't got any deep feelings to trouble you and that the passing sunshine of to-day wipes out the shadows of your memory."

It was Colonel Carr-Mathers who stood beside them. He had come so quietly along the belt of white sand lying at the edge of the shingles where they were sitting that they had not noticed his approach.

"And I think," said Margaret Kingslake, looking the Colonel full in the face with her deep brown eyes, "that neither passing sunshine nor passing shower can affect those shadows. They are too deeply graven upon his heart, and it is from them he gathers his philosophy. He reminds me of those lines of Browning,

The Future I may face now I have proved the Past.

"I know nothing of Browning," replied the Colonel, smiling sardonically. "I judge of things by my own experience, not from the ravings of foolish poets and sentimentalists. And when you are as old as I am, very likely you will throw such rubbish to the winds. It's delightfully pretty to hear Ward talk like this, but, as I say, it's just because he's a simpleton and doesn't understand things."

"I wish more people had his lack of understanding, then," replied Margaret.

"My dear Miss Kingslake," said the Colonel, "recollect you are young, and consequently inclined to be happy and to make the best of things. But you may not always have happy memories to look back upon. Then, perhaps, you may come round more to my way of thinking."

"And I don't b'lieve she ever will, sir," broke in the fisherman, who had taken in the gist of what the Colonel had been saying. "Miss Marg'ret's bound to be happy, even if so be as she has to suffer for it. I knows it."

"Truly a pig-headed optimist!" snarled Colonel Carr-Mathers.

"Thank you, Ward," said Margaret Kingslake very quietly. A sad, pained expression had come into her face. The Colonel imagined he had hurt her feelings, and was half sorry for it.

"And I'll tell 'ee what, sir," went on Harry Ward in his frank, independent manner, "I wouldn't change places with you, sir, not for all your big house and your land, not for all——"

"Not for all my loneliness and memories," broke in the Colonel with a deeper and more serious voice. "Before God you are right, my man. You wouldn't be happy if you did."

"Likewise, sir, if so be as I *had* ha' been you, I wouldn't ha' been the miserable gen'leman as you makes yourself."

The sentence was terribly ungrammatical but sincerely expressive, and the Colonel said nothing in reply. But a sudden stiffness on his part warned the fisherman that it was unwise to pursue the subject.

"And is this the child that was found on the marshes?" asked the Colonel after a moment. "It's the first time I've ever seen her."

"Yes," replied Margaret, "this is little Bertha Noel; isn't she growing pretty?"

"Humph! Beauty isn't everything. Good morning, Miss Kingslake," said the Colonel as he glanced at the child, raised his hat, and passed on.

"Poor chap!" said Harry Ward presently.

"Who?"

"The Colonel. He don't mean 'arf he says, though he thinks he do."

"He has suffered much," replied Margaret, "and we must be sorry for him. It is not every one who can take things so happily as you. Well, we must be going,

Bertha and I. Say good-bye, dearie. Wave your hand. That's right!"

Harry Ward gazed after her as she carried the child up the beach.

"Tom," he said, "there's somethin' wrong with Miss Marg'ret. I knows there is."

"Why?"

"'Cause she ain't nearly so lively as she was. Seems to me she's a-thinkin' and a-worryin' to herself over somethin'. Lor', Tom, we all on us has troubles. Don't us?"

Tom nodded and went on with his work. After a bit he let fall quite a lengthy sentence.

"You was right, Harry; she'd bear troubles well; p'r'aps she'll have to."

And the fisherman was right in his other conjecture. There was something troubling Margaret Kingslake, something she dared hardly confess even to herself. And that something was John Lingwood. Ever since that Christmas Eve when he had picked up little Bertha on the marshes the shadow of a terrible doubt had begun to fall upon the true-hearted girl. It was not that he had quarrelled with her or ever said anything, but slowly and by degrees a thought had forced itself upon her mind. He had somehow ceased to show that she was all in all to him. There seemed to be something hidden, some strange absorption that drew him away from her love. She had tried to put it down to the thought that he was working hard and earnestly to provide her with a home. And yet that would only have brought her closer to him—her for whose happiness he was toiling. But somehow he had shown over and over again, when she was talking to him of things she loved, revealing the thoughts that only lovers do reveal, that he was not interested. It might have been a look, a gesture, some little impatient remark on his part; but over and over again she had felt herself ignored and had lapsed into silence. And then, too, his visits to Rundleham had become less frequent. The Vicarage had always seen him at least twice a week, but now often a fortnight passed. Of course, work was his plea, but then his letters had become so brief and cold. Often as she wandered over the marshes or sat listening to the sea's murmur on the low-lying shore, she had thought it over, in doubt, in bitterness, in anger with herself at her own imagination. She loved him so strongly and so deeply. He was her all in all. "Oh, no, no!" she would say to herself, "it must be my foolish fancies. I expect too much. I am so selfish. God forgive me for harbouring such thoughts!"

One thing about him, though, there was to please her and to make her love him still more, and that was the kindly interest he took in Bertha. He always had a smile and a greeting for the child, and a kiss for the little rosy face. It had long ago been settled definitely that she was to remain at the Vicarage, but a sort of little compromise was effected, by which John Lingwood posed as a kind of extra guardian to the child, and had promised to provide for her education in later years in the event of the Vicar being still alive. He had even humorously drawn up a kind of little agreement to this effect, which the Vicar had signed with a laugh.

"Upon my word, you lawyers are wonderfully fussy and careful people," he had said.

"We have to be," replied John Lingwood; "it's our business, you know."

And he had pocketed the paper in high good humour.

Harry Ward was right that morning. Later on in the day the wind began to rise, and when John Lingwood came in the evening it was blowing fresh and strong from the westward. He had been playing in a neighbouring cricket-match and looked handsome and youthful in his flannels and blazer.

He strolled with Margaret down to the sea. The sun was setting, fiery red, tinging the foaming waves with his glow, while a strange effect was produced by the wind blowing clouds of white dry sand about a couple of feet high, just along the water's edge, these clouds being tinged with the western radiance.

"O John, is it not weird and beautiful?" she asked.

"Very likely. But I'm hungry. If I'm to have supper before I start we'd better be getting back to the house."

"I wish you would not cut me short like this," she said, with almost a choke in her voice. "You used to love to hear me talk about such things. Is there no romance in you?"

"Oh, plenty. But not when I'm tired. And I can't always be sentimental."

He spoke quite harshly. The girl turned to him with a longing look in her face. Few men who had met those pleading eyes, kissed

by the warm beauty of the setting sun, could have resisted their pleading.

"You are always like this now, John."

"Always like what?"

"I don't know. I used to be so happy with you, telling you my thoughts and fancies. And you used to listen to them always."

"My dear Margaret, you can't expect a man to be continually talking sentiment. We must think of more serious things sometimes."

"Such as supper?" she said, with a little hollow laugh.

"Well, yes; even supper. We can't feed on romance, you know."

She did not say anything for a few minutes as they walked along. Neither did she notice that John Lingwood was looking at her out of the corners of his eyes, with a peculiar expression and a slight smile twitching upon his lips.

He left directly after supper. It was still twilight, and Margaret strolled round the Vicarage garden after he had gone. The garden was bounded on the south side by a low stone wall, and as she leaned upon it she could hear the surging rush of the waves borne upon the strong breeze from the shore. Wild, tempestuous clouds were beginning to gather in the darkening sky. It all suited her mood, this mysterious unrest of Nature following upon the quiet summer morning. She gazed out over the broad meadows and marshes with a deep, passionate longing in her heart. Her eyes fell upon one bright star flashing from between the scudding clouds, and she thought of Longfellow's poem, "The Light of Stars." She caught herself murmuring some of its stanzas:

> Is it the tender star of love?
> The star of love and dreams?
> Oh no! . . .
> the red planet Mars,
> The star of the unconquered will,
> He rises in my breast,
> Serene, and resolute, and still,
> And calm and self-possessed.
>
> . . . . .
>
> Oh fear not in a world like this,
> And thou shalt know ere long,
> Know how sublime a thing it is
> To suffer and be strong.

She turned sadly towards the house, repeating this last verse. It seemed almost like a prophecy from the world of nature and the first glimpse of the strong, calm consolation that the voices of nature bestow upon the restless soul. And yet she hoped against hope — she dared not analyse all those troubled thoughts that rose with the spirit of the storm.

"Margaret," said her father as he bade her good-night, "you do not look well, dear. Is anything the matter?"

"Nothing, father. I am a little tired; that is all."

The old man stroked her hair tenderly. He was so placid, so simple-minded, that it would have been impossible for him to even have dreamed of her trouble.

"Good-night, my dear," he said gently; "God bless you! Ah me, how the years roll on! Soon there will be no Margaret to say good-night to."

She flung her arms round his neck and kissed his broad white forehead.

"Oh, father," she said, "sometimes I think I can never leave you, I—I—am so happy with you, and——"

"And you will always be happy, my dear," he answered. "I ought not to complain. Besides, I shall have little Bertha to cheer me up—for a few years perhaps. There—I see you are tired. Good-night again, dear!"

"O God!" prayed his daughter that night, "if it should ever be so—what I dare not contemplate—give me Thy strength. Help me to suffer and be strong!"

It was the beginning of the end. As the months went by her heart told her more and more plainly that John Lingwood's love for her had waned. It was not so much what he said as his manner, his want of sympathy. He had just the same blunt, straightforward ways with him, his laugh was as hearty as ever, but he always seemed to repel her, to silence any outburst of affection, to be even relieved whenever he said good-bye to her. She tried to see what it was that had come between them, but in vain. Certainly she knew of no other woman, and the thought brought her a little consolation. She analysed herself in the hope that she might discover if anything in her were lacking, but no; her heart told her that she was still as true and devoted as ever. Yet she knew she had lost his love.

It was Christmas Eve; just a year since little Bertha had been found. He had

ridden over to the Vicarage, bringing with him a present for the child. She was beginning to learn a few simple words, and he smiled as she was made to say by the Vicar, "Tank oo!" He kissed her and went over to the church. Margaret had finished decorating and was just coming out. He greeted her rather coldly.

"I am afraid I shall not be able to get over in time for church to-morrow," he began.

"I meant to speak to you for a few minutes, John," she said quietly. "Will you walk with me over the meadows?"

Her face was very pale, her lips set tightly together, and his eyes fell before the strong sad look she gave him. He made some commonplace remark, and they passed out of the churchyard into the meadows.

"Well," he asked presently, "what is it you want to say to me, Margaret?"

"Many, many things I could say, but I would spare you as willingly as I would spare myself."

"What is the matter? Surely you don't want to pick a quarrel just at Christmas! Surely——"

"John," she interrupted, "I am not going to quarrel with you, nor you with me, I hope. I am only going to say something that is very painful to me—something, perhaps, that your own heart has warned you of."

"I don't understand you," he said bluntly.

"I think you do, though it is bitterness to me to have to say so. Ask yourself. Remember last Christmas Eve and contrast it with this."

"How?"

"O John, you know what I mean. Can you be blind to yourself? I do not wish to reproach you. You were free to love or to cease loving. You have chosen the latter course. No! hear me out. I don't ask for explanations, for I feel that time has gone by. I accuse you of nothing dishonourable or false, but I know—how can I help it?—and you know too, that your love for me has been dying, that I am not what I was to you a year ago."

"My dear Margaret, you are imagining things."

"Imagining things! God knows I wish I were, though it may be weak of me to confess it. You would not answer me like that if you did not know how true my words are."

"But what is it you want? What——"

"I want nothing!" she retorted, stopping and confronting him. "I ask for nothing, and I give back all. Now do you understand what I wanted to say?"

"You give back all!"

"All!" and she slowly drew the engagement-ring from her finger; "and no one but myself will ever know how much that word means. I set you free of my own determined will. I break this engagement between us, John Lingwood, and I will bear the brunt of it. And since you cannot—I know you cannot—ever give me the old love, remember that I want no pity. I set you free because I know it is better for you that I should, nor do I act upon the impulse of a moment. There are times when women can calmly calculate the wisdom of an action as well as men, and I have reasoned this out from the beginning. There is no other way, and you know it."

He expostulated with her as she stood before him, the ring in her outstretched hand. He told her that she was acting foolishly, that she did not know her own mind. He did everything that a man might have done, and yet nothing that a lover would have. There was no appealing tenderness in his voice, no love-look in his eyes, no gesture of affection. He acted as he would have done towards a client; that was all.

And so the woman's heart within her showed her still more plainly that she was right.

"No!" she said; "I have made up my mind. I am not angry. Do not think that. I am not so weak but that I can always look upon you as a friend. I am not so bitter but that I can say from the bottom of my heart that I wish you all happiness. But I can never be your wife. I feel it would be a mockery. I could never marry the man who had lost his love for me in the very smallest degree."

"At least," he said, as at length she forced the ring into his hand, "you will do me the justice to say that I have not broken the tie."

It was the only time her eyes flashed.

"You need not be afraid," she replied,

with the faintest tinge of scorn in her voice. "I told you I would bear the blame, and I will bear it to the full. Even my father shall never know that I doubted your affection."

They walked back in silence. She was very pale, but her set face betrayed none of the conflict within her. When they reached the churchyard she turned to him and held out her hand.

"Good-bye," she said simply.

"Good-bye," he answered. "I suppose I may come sometimes and see your father—and little Bertha?"

"Of course," she replied. "There is no need for you to quarrel with us."

A stranger meeting him on the road would scarcely have guessed that he was a rejected suitor. He looked too cheerful. And if any one could have analysed his thoughts, this would have been the gist of them.

"At last! I began to think I should have to break it off myself, and that would never have done. Poor Margaret, it's rather hard for you; but you stood in the way, you see. Now, John Lingwood, patience and tact may carry you through."

That night Margaret said, very quietly, to the Vicar:

"Father dear, I've got some news to tell you. You must not be angry with me and you must not judge me too harshly. I have broken off my engagement with John. I have thought over it for a long time, and to-day I have told him."

Poor, docile old man! He could not understand it, and it came as a severe shock to him. In vain he questioned her as to her motives. He was very fond of John Lingwood, and had been deeply thankful to think that his daughter would have so good a husband. He was pained and grieved beyond expression, but presently he said:

"My dear child, I have always said that I would never try to thwart your happiness nor to force you to marry any man against your will. I have too great a respect for the sanctity of that tie which binds two lives together. You must take your own course. But I am deeply grieved about it. And I am more sorry than I can say for poor John. It will be terrible to him."

"Father dear, I know it is for the best. And you will always have me with you now."

"Dear child! You are not doing this for my sake, are you?"

"No; I am not. Oh, father, this is a sad Christmas for me. Don't, don't speak of it any more to-night; I cannot bear it. Good-night, dear father."

He sat up late that night trying to compose his sermon. But it was a mournful little discourse that the villagers listened to on Christmas morning. And when the words of the anthem, "Peace and good will," rang out, poor Margaret's heart replied:

"Not peace—but a sword!"

The Vicar saw John Lingwood a few days later and almost broke down when he told him how sorry he was for him. And he thought John took it nobly, and reminded him that he would always be a welcome visitor at the Vicarage.

"Besides," he added, "you must come and see us sometimes. For you are a sort of guardian to little Bertha, you know."

And John Lingwood promised he would come.

The news that Margaret had broken off the engagement soon got about, and the village wondered much. Colonel Carr-Mathers spoke to John Lingwood on the subject.

"I hear she's thrown you over," he said, "and I think you've been a fool to let her do so. You'll never find a better woman, Lingwood."

And to Margaret he said, in his short, cynical manner:

"I'm sorry to hear this, Miss Kingslake. But you women are all alike—very fickle."

"Indeed," she said, drawing herself up stiffly. "It is scarcely any concern of yours."

"Very likely not. But you mustn't mind me giving vent to my feelings sometimes."

There was only one person in the world who really understood, and he was a gentleman by nature. He met Margaret one day as he was coming home from the marshes, a big bundle of withes on his shoulder, singing lustily.

"Always happy, Ward!" she said.

"Yes, miss. Though 'tis many a trouble I've been through to get happy. When I was your age, miss, I never thought I should be so cheerful like as I am now. 'Twas then I lost my first wife. And, beggin' your pardon, miss, there ain't nothin' more cruel than to lose some one we loves. I knows

it. But the Lord knows how to comfort us, though He takes years a-doin' of it sometimes."

"Thank you, Ward," said the girl simply, for she understood his meaning.

CHAPTER IV

JUST over ten years had passed since that Christmas Eve that John Lingwood had found the child on Rundleham Marshes. The old Vicar was still alive, placid as ever, a little feebler perhaps, but still well able to perform his simple duties. Margaret was there to take care of him. She had grown sadder and more thoughtful, but not less sweet; in truth, the village loved her more than ever. For only those who have suffered much can show that deep sympathy for others which identifies itself with their burdens, and many a simple cottage had Margaret enshrined in the hearts of its inmates. Even Colonel Carr-Mathers, stiff and military as he ever was, softened sometimes into a more kindly mood when he met Margaret Kingslake.

But if the Vicar's daughter had lost her early joyousness there was one in the house who threw a light over the shadows. Bertha Noel was now more than eleven years old, a gay-hearted, high-spirited girl, who kept the Vicarage alive with her happiness and frolics. She had grown handsome. Her wavy brown hair and dark blue eyes, her fresh complexion, her winning laugh, all prophesied of the woman that was to be. She was idolised by the Vicar and his daughter, even unto spoiling, though the former at times tried to take her seriously to task and as often failed. For whenever he began to lecture her gently for some mad freak or other she would climb on his knee and throw her arms round his neck till he only laughed at her and kissed her.

There had been a talk with John Lingwood about sending her to school, but she had begged so hard to continue her studies with the Vicar and Margaret till she was a little older that the lawyer had agreed to wait awhile. The fact was she loved Rundleham and everything connected with it. To ramble over the marshes, finding rare plants or wild flowers, to go out in the fishermen's boats, to hunt for crabs and periwinkles on the big stretches of shingle which the tide laid bare at its ebb—these were all delights to her. And of all the fishermen she loved best the red-bearded man who told her so often how he had carried her home across the sluice that bright frosty morning. And Harry Ward, who was as strong and hearty as ever, always welcomed the bright-eyed, laughing girl when she came down to the beach, and was loath to refuse her when she begged a seat in his stout old boat, even though there was but scant room for her.

About this time there came to the Vicarage a new playfellow for Bertha, a boy some two or three years older than herself. Lawrence Gray was the son of an old friend of the Kingslake family who had died. His widow had come to live at Burchester, and Mr. Kingslake had offered to take the boy for a time as pupil, more especially to coach him up for a scholarship. So he came to board at the Vicarage.

He was a quiet, reserved youth, quite a contrast to Bertha Noel. Consequently they soon become fast friends. She took him to all her favourite haunts. She laughed at the care with which he attempted to help her over the crazy old sluice. She showed him the famous patch of Bartsia viscasa, that rare flower that only grew on the marshes. She pointed out the different wild fowl to him, the hoopoe, the tern and the lonely abode of the heron. She led him one day to the place where she had been found.

"There," she said, "that's where I sprang from. Isn't it funny? I don't even know what my name is. They call me Noel because I was found on Christmas Eve."

"Don't you know who your father and mother were?"

"No; they just picked me up. My mother was dead and could tell them nothing."

"Don't you often wonder who you are?"

"Oh, I never bother about it. Dear old daddy and Sissy love me, and that's enough. And I'm just happy as I am. Let's have a race back to the sluice. Are you ready? One—two—three—off!"

She had a start of him and kept it. He nearly caught her up just before the sluice, but she cried out:

"The other side's the winning-post!"

"Take care!" he shouted as she sprang upon the old planks. "Stop, Bertha, you'll be over!"

"All right!" she said, throwing her head back and turning to look at him. "Oh!"

Suddenly her foot slipped, she reeled on one side, and Lawrence saw her fall with a shriek into the whirl of black waters below. He just gave one quick glance round, and in that glance he saw a figure in the distance. Then he uttered a loud cry for help and jumped without a moment's hesitation into the water after her. He was a good swimmer, but it was all he could do to save her. After an awful struggle he managed to drag her with him to the timbers at the side of the sluice-gates and held on to a post with one arm while he supported her with the other. But it was impossible for him to lift her any farther. Fortunately, however, his cry had been heard, and a minute or two later a face looked down upon them from the beams above.

"Hullo!" cried a voice, "what's the matter? Hold on, Gray; for God's sake don't let her go!"

It was John Lingwood, pale and agitated as he caught sight of Bertha.

"All right!" replied Lawrence; "I've got her safely enough. If you climb down a bit you can reach her."

Lingwood got down on one of the lower beams and lay flat on it. By stretching down his arms he was able to seize Bertha and raise her up. Another moment and he was carrying her to the bank, where he set her down beside his gun, for he had come upon the scene as we met him in the first chapter. She was more frightened than hurt.

"You young fool," he exclaimed savagely as Lawrence climbed up the sluice and stood dripping beside them, "you might have drowned her. Don't you know better than to get skylarking in such a dangerous place?"

"Don't scold him, Mr. Lingwood," cried Bertha, standing up and shaking herself; "it was all my fault, and if it hadn't been for him I should have been drowned. Thanks awfully, Lawrence."

"You've more cause to thank me than him," snarled John Lingwood; "he could never have pulled you out. For goodness' sake, run back to the Vicarage as fast as you can. Here, I'll go with you."

He took her by the hand and made her run. She seemed to look upon the whole thing as a joke, but he was very angry and upset, and he told the Vicar so.

"You really mustn't let that boy lead her into mischief," he said. "He's not fit to trust her to."

"Dear me, dear me," sighed the Vicar, "this is very terrible; why, she might have been drowned. And did the boy jump in after her? That was brave of him."

"What else could he do?" retorted Lingwood. "I think it's high time she was sent to school. She's getting too old to run wild over the country like this."

"There, there," said the Vicar, with a deprecating wave of his hand; "let us be thankful that there was no harm done. Indeed, Providence seems to watch over the child."

"I think I've been more useful than Providence in more ways than one," replied the lawyer hotly.

"Lingwood," said the Vicar, with the stern voice he could assume when his religion was assailed, "you have been an instrument of Providence."

"Perhaps I have," muttered the other as he left the Vicarage, "but not exactly in the way the old man means."

From this day Lawrence and Bertha became faster friends than ever. Margaret often smiled in her sad, sweet way as she saw them start forth together for a ramble over the beach or the marshes. She was very fond of the boy, and they had one interest in common, for Lawrence Gray was passionately devoted to music. Margaret used to take him into the church and give him lessons on the organ, and nothing pleased him more than to be allowed to accompany the little children's service which the Vicar always had on Sunday afternoons.

"I should like to be an organist when I grow up," he told Margaret one day.

She shook her head.

"There are a great many things we have to give up as we grow older, and you know you have other work to do."

"I hate the thought of being a solicitor."

"I daresay. But it is your duty. Remember your dead father's wish. Besides, you will not have to give up music altogether, you know."

Colonel Carr-Mathers sometimes came to pay a formal call at the Vicarage. One afternoon he was shown into a room where

Lawrence and Bertha were. The Colonel disliked children as a rule, but he said a few words to them while he waited.

"Let me see," he remarked; "you're the boy that jumped into the 'rife' a few weeks ago, are you not?"

"Yes, sir."

"Umph! That's right, my lad. Never be a coward."

"Wasn't it awfully good of him?" asked Bertha.

"No, my child," he said tersely as he looked at her; "he only did what he ought to have done."

"I think he was brave; there!"

"Oh, you do, eh? Well, it's silly of you to tell him so. That's the way women spoil good men. . . . Come here, child!"

He was sitting with his back to the light, gazing curiously at her. She was always a little bit in awe of the stern, grisled colonel, and she felt quite a shiver run through her as he seized her hand and looked into her eyes.

At that moment Margaret entered.

"I'm sorry you should have been kept waiting," she said.

"Oh, it doesn't matter. I had company, you see," he answered, still looking at Bertha.

"Now, then, you young people, the Colonel will excuse you, I dare say," said Margaret.

They said good-bye and went out. The Colonel walked to the window and watched them down the garden-path.

"They seem a devoted young couple," he remarked grimly.

"Are they not? Do you know Lawrence is quite devoted to her, though she teases him dreadfully?"

"Ah! It's well for children to be happy! They'll meet the rough places of life soon enough. That girl is growing handsome—very handsome," he said musingly.

"She will be a very pretty woman. Poor child! We often wonder who she really is."

"Ah! You're not likely to find out after all these years. I'll tell you what, Miss Kingslake, I like the look of that boy. Pity he isn't going into the army. What's his mother going to make of him?"

"It is all arranged. If he gets his scholarship for Malvern and afterwards wins one from there to Oxford, Mr. Lingwood has promised his mother to give him his articles on a very small premium."

"Yes; I remember he told me so. Well, it's good of Lingwood. But I'd rather see a boy like that in uniform."

"And he likes neither. His choice would be a musical profession."

"Music? Bah!" said the Colonel.

Now it was in the course of this particular summer that Harry Ward made a little discovery, which he thought nothing of at the time, and which, in fact, passed out of his mind until years afterwards. The old fisherman invariably went for a walk on Sunday afternoons clad in his best blue guernsey, his reefer jacket, and a big bowler hat. Also he invariably smoked his particular Sunday pipe, for on that day the short clay was laid on one side and a briar took its place. He generally walked by himself and with as light and youthful a step as ever. Moreover, his favourite ramble was always somewhere across the marshes.

On the Sunday in question a strong wind was blowing, and Harry Ward, to his great discomfiture, found, when he essayed to relight his pipe, that there was only one solitary match left in his box. Fearful lest the wind should rob him of his coveted smoke, he stepped aside into a clump of reeds and knelt down while he struck his precious match. He lit his pipe safely, and was just on the point of rising, when his eye caught what looked like a tarnished bit of metal lying on the ground. He picked it up out of curiosity, and found it to be a small silver match-box, with a curious design in filagree work upon it.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed; "maybe there's a match inside."

But there was not. He opened it and found it to contain a single lock of hair. That was all.

"Some chap's been a-carryin' a love-lock 'bout with him and dropped it, I'll 'low," he said as he put the match-box into his pocket.

He thought little more about it, but from that day forth the silver match-box, polished till it shone again, formed part of his Sunday paraphernalia, and reposed in his best reefer jacket along with his special briar pipe.

"Fancy you a-takin' to joolry in your old age!" was the remark his wife made about

it. "You'll be wantin' a gold chain and a di'mond ring next."

The summer went by, and with the biting winds of late autumn a new sorrow dawned for Margaret Kingslake. For there came a strange shaking into the hand of the old Vicar when he wrote his simple little sermons, and a tremulous quaver in his voice when he preached them, and Margaret began to know that the Great Reaper was laying a gentle hand upon her father and was going to lead him away. Lawrence Gray gained his scholarship and was to go to Malvern the first term of the new year. And then the Vicar gave up his teaching with a sigh—even Bertha was too much for him.

At length Christmas Day came round once more. Margaret led her father to church, but oh, how heavily he leaned upon her arm! The Colonel was there, grim and stiff as ever, sitting in the great gallery pew gazing at the hatchments opposite. Lawrence Gray had ridden his bicycle over to Rundleham and was seated in the Vicarage pew with Bertha Noel. The villagers had gathered once again to hear the old story of the good tidings and to join in the time-worn hymns while Margaret played the dear old tunes they knew so well.

The Vicar had just given the blessing, and then—as if all were over—as they responded with the last Amen, he fell to the ground in the chancel. There was a terrible ending ot the quiet service. Colonel Carr-Mathers came down from his gallery pew, Margaret rushed to her father, who was quite unconscious, and in a few minutes Harry Ward and some of the other fishermen present carried him into the Vicarage. The Colonel followed them.

"It is a fit, I'm afraid," he told Margaret gravely. "You will allow me to send my dog-cart in to Burchester at once for the doctor."

"It is very kind of you," she said, stifling a sob.

"Is there anything else I can do? Please tell me, Miss Kingslake."

"Oh, nothing—nothing, I am afraid."

"Let me take the two youngsters home to lunch. It will be a relief to you to have them out of the way."

She looked at him gratefully and with some astonishment, for the Colonel had never invited any one to a meal within her recollection.

"Thank you so much," she said.

"Very well. I'll come in by-and-by. I am very sorry for you in your trouble."

"I know you are," she answered, holding out her hand. "And I appreciate your sympathy."

He took Lawrence and Bertha home with him. The butler almost fainted with horror when he was told he was to lay lunch for three. The Colonel ate little, but watched his young companions closely. When the meal was over he sent the girl home, but kept Lawrence for a few minutes.

"I fear you are going to lose your kind old tutor," he said.

"Yes, sir. It's very sad."

"It will be saddest for Miss Kingslake, my boy. She will have no one left except Bertha now. Well, I hear you have won your scholarship, and I hope it will mean a start in life to you. Take the advice of an old soldier, and obey your mother. Keep steady, lad, and keep true. And remember this: don't forget your old friends, especially Miss Kingslake, for she is a friend worth having. Good-bye, my boy. You may come and see me in your holidays, if you like."

"Thank you, sir. Good-bye."

"A fine lad," muttered the Colonel when he had gone; "just like Arthur used to be at his age. Ah me!"

The doctor came that afternoon, but only shook his head. And a fortnight later they laid the old pastor to rest amid the grief of his flock. And hardy men like Harry Ward were fain to rub their rough hands over their eyes, and women were not ashamed of their tears. For they had all loved the placid, gentle old man whose voice they would hear no more, whose smile would never again brighten their simple homes.

The next morning the Colonel called on Margaret and opened the conversation with his usual brusque manner.

"What are you going to do?"

"I can hardly tell yet. I must make a home for Bertha and myself somewhere. She will go to school now, I expect, but she shall always have me for a mother."

"Of course. You will find it a great wrench leaving Rundleham."

"I shall, I fear. I love the place so much. I feel it will take years to get reconciled elsewhere. It has all come so suddenly, and

as yet I have hardly dared to think of the future."

"Will you allow me to make a suggestion?"

"What is it?"

"I had a great respect for your father, Miss Kingslake, and I have a certain regard for his daughter. I have thought it over very carefully, and I should like to honour his memory by making his daughter as happy as this world's circumstances can do. For this reason I trust you will accept the offer I am about to make."

"I don't understand."

"My little house, 'Sea View Cottage,' is empty. I wish to place it absolutely at your disposal, and to furnish it. So at all events there will be a home for you in the village as long as you care to remain."

"Oh, Colonel, how can I thank you enough for your kindness? But——"

"Let there be no 'buts,' please. It is a pleasure for me to help you. I don't often do anybody any good, so I shall be pained if you refuse."

She waited a few minutes in silence. Then she said:

"I will accept, Colonel Carr-Mathers. It is the greatest happiness you could have given me. I know my means will not be large, but with a home, and that home in Rundleham, I shall be content."

"Very well then. Consider it settled."

"Bertha," said Margaret as the former entered the room a minute later, "You must thank the Colonel for something he has just done," and she told the girl.

"Isn't it kind of him?" she asked.

"It's just awfully kind of you, and Sissy deserves it too," said the girl, putting her arm round her neck.

"I think she does," replied the Colonel, "and much more."

"And so there will be a home for us both, Bertha dear."

"And even if you hadn't a home at all, you'd have had me to work for you, by-and-by, Sissy," said the girl, kissing her. "I've got to thank you for everything—you and dear, dear daddy!"

"So mind you repay it!" snapped the Colonel, relapsing suddenly into his old stiff mood; "and don't forget that you might have been a pauper."

And he walked out without another word.

"He's a nasty, cross-grained old wretch!' cried Bertha, stamping her foot with passion. "What right has he to speak to me like that?"

"Hush, child! He is a man who has passed through great trouble and is soured, but his heart is good at the bottom of it. He has made me so grateful to him to-day."

"And I wish he hadn't; there! I wish—I wish it had been Mr. Lingwood. He's a thousand times better. I'm sure he'd have helped you if you'd have asked him."

Margaret's pale face winced with pain. She knew the girl had never heard of the old engagement.

"Bertha," she said quietly, "you do not know what you are talking about. I think you had better leave me till you have conquered your temper."

It was seldom Margaret spoke like this, and Bertha felt the rebuke.

"Dearest Sissy," she whispered that night, "I'm sorry I lost my temper. And—and—I do want always to be good to you and to help you."

"And so you will, dear Bertha," said Margaret as she kissed her good-night. "You are all I have now."

CHAPTER V

TIME had passed and brought with it its changes. It was now getting on for eighteen years since the opening of the story on the Rundleham Marshes. They had been years of patient waiting to John Lingwood. The lawyer had never married, and there were those who said that his early disappointment had taken all thought of such a thing out of his life. He was now quite fifty, but might have passed for a much younger man as far as his looks were concerned. He was just as much of a sportsman, just as blunt as ever, and his business had prospered well; in fact, he held the secrets of most of the best families around and in Burchester in his tin deed-boxes. Lawrence Gray had been articled now to him for some time and had a little room of his own on the ground-floor of the dingy old house in Burchester. The two clerks who had witnessed Colonel Carr-Mathers' will had long disappeared from the town, but there were others who sat on their stools, chief of which was one named Roger Kemp, a man with shifty, greenish eyes

peeping out from beneath their eyebrows; a pasty white complexion, and light, mouse-coloured hair, whose reputation outside the lawyer's office was none of the best, and who, among other things, nourished a strong antipathy to Lawrence Gray, born of that innate feeling which a man of loose conscience always bears towards righteousness in others.

John Lingwood's private office was the same as ever, a little more musty and stuffy, perhaps, while the ancient cuckoo had grown still more hoarse in crying the hours through the years. The great iron safe stood in its old corner, gripping its secrets, holding within its grasp that mystery of John Lingwood's life which was only known to himself, holding, perhaps, the man's very heart. Over and over again he would draw forth that packet of papers which he had placed therein on that first Christmas Eve, and study them carefully, and sigh and pray to the powers of darkness for more patience. More than once Roger Kemp, on going suddenly into the private office, had discovered his master sitting before them, and had shrewdly observed how swiftly he had put them back into their great blue envelope and locked it in the safe once more. Roger Kemp was a man with a double side to his character. Strongly inquisitive concerning others, reticent in all that he discovered about them, he was, nevertheless, a "hail fellow well met" with some of the most disreputable youths of Burchester, and, among other things, indulged deeply in horse racing, and gambled heavily at cards and billiards, far more heavily than he could afford. Rumours of this had reached the lawyer's ears more than once, but the latter felt that Roger Kemp was too shrewd a man in his work for him to part with in a hurry.

At Rundleham things were as quiet and placid as ever. Colonel Carr-Mathers was growing very infirm and walked slowly, with the aid of a stick. He was no longer the straight, upright soldier, and it was with difficulty that he mounted the steep staircase to his pew every Sunday. For though the new Vicar had "restored" the church, and the old oak seats below had vanished, and men had not where to hang their hats, the Colonel had threatened that if his family pew were in any way tampered with he would withdraw every penny of his subscriptions to the Vicar's charities. So the latter had to put up with what he termed an eyesore, together with the hatchments, which he thought unseemly. And between the Colonel and himself there was a coldness which never need have existed; and while he spoke to his fellow "modern" clergy about his "terrible squire," the latter always mentioned him to Lingwood or Margaret as "that fool of a parson."

As for Margaret Kingslake, she lived a simple, retired life in the cottage, and was more or less hated by the Vicar's wife and daughters because the village loved her so well.

"The fact is," the Vicar's wife would remark to her bosom friends, "it was a great mistake for her to remain in the village, and she ought to have seen it. Of course she is very useful in playing the organ, but her father was very old-fashioned, and she doesn't understand how a parish ought to be worked. You see, the people are fond of her, and it sometimes hampers my husband in his work. I'm not saying a word against her, but I often wish she'd go. I'm sure it would be better in every way."

Poor Margaret! She cared little for the Vicar's wife, and she never interfered with the affairs of the parish. Her only fault was that folks like Harry Ward and his wife liked her handshake and her sweetness better than the stiff nod and inquisitive questions of the "Vicaress." But then, Harry Ward was an ignorant old man and did not know what was best for him.

He was as hale and hearty as ever, for all his threescore and ten years. He and old Tom could do their day's work and pull their heavy old boat against many a younger couple of men. He could sing a song with the best of them, ay, and dance a hornpipe as lightly as ever.

"The older I grows the younger I gets," he would say to Margaret; "and I'll tell 'ee for why, miss. It's 'cause I keeps so happy. And folks is wonnerful kind to me. Why, I meets with a smile and a hearty word just wherever I goes. 'Tis amazin'!"

"That's because you always give smiles and kindly words. You have grasped the secret of true happiness, Ward."

"Ay, and so have you, miss. I often ses to myself that Miss Marg'ret's had a hard lesson to learn. For I knows you have, beggin' your pardon, miss. But you be come through the furnace, same as a many on us have—thank the Lord for it."

She smiled sweetly as she answered:

"I think you understand," she said. "I know I am not so light-hearted as I used to be. The sea's murmur seems sadder to me now, the marshes are more lonely to me than when I used to roam over them as a girl. But it is a happiness to me to live here, in the dear old spot, a happiness, perhaps, that has taken the place of that to which I looked forward once."

The old fisherman was privileged, and he knew it. He laid his rough hand gently on her arm and said, very softly and even with tenderness:

"B'lieve me, miss, he warn't worthy of you. I don't wish to speak agen him, but I feels 'twas for the best."

"Perhaps it was," said Margaret, as she turned away to hide the tear that glistened for a moment in her eye. There was, indeed, a bond of sympathy between them.

Bertha Noel was living in the cottage with Margaret. Her education was finished now, and the bright-eyed girl had grown into the woman. And a very lovely woman she was too, and, in truth, there was more of the girl about her still. John Lingwood had acted his part as guardian towards her well, and she felt deeply grateful towards him. But she had ever remained faithful to "Sissy," and each holiday had always brought her back to Rundleham. John Lingwood often came over to see her. He seemed to have quite forgotten the tie that once bound him to Margaret, and neither had made any allusion to it since that Christmas Eve when it was broken once and for all. In her heart of hearts Margaret found these visits more of a pain than a pleasure, but she stifled her feelings with the thought that her father had always wished Lingwood to continue taking an interest in the child which he had found.

"I can't make out," remarked Bertha one day, "why you are always so cold to John."

He had made her call him by his christian-name, and she looked upon him as an elder brother.

Margaret laughed. "Oh, it must be your fancy, Bertha. I'm sure I appreciate all Mr. Lingwood's kindness to you."

"Yes—to me. But you are quite frigid towards him very often. I wish you liked him better."

"He is a generous man."

"I should think he was. I'm awfully fond of dear old John. And I often wonder why he never got married."

Margaret set her lips. Did Bertha guess? she wondered.

"Perhaps no one would have him," she replied.

"Oh, it couldn't have been that, I'm sure. I don't expect he ever asked any one; do you, Sissy?"

Margaret breathed freely once more.

"How can I tell?" she answered with a smile. "So you are very fond of him, are you?"

"Rather! He's a dear old brother."

"And sometimes I wonder whether you are fond of anybody else, Bertha; some one who, I fancy, is very fond of you."

Bertha blushed and her bright eyes sparkled.

"You darling old Sissy," she said, "I don't know a bit what you mean. And Lawrence is only a boy—and—and that's quite a different sort of thing, you know—and—don't ask such silly questions. I'm quite happy with you, and I don't want anyone else to love me; there!"

"My goodness!" replied Margaret, laughing heartily, "what a terrible fuss about nothing at all. . . . Dear Bertha," she added gently, drawing the girl towards her, "I hope, whatever happens, that you will always be very, very happy. You know you must always remember that you are a Christmas gift, and Christmas gifts are sent by God to make people rejoice. You have brought much happiness to me, dear," she went on, stroking Bertha's hair tenderly, "and perhaps the time will come when you will be somebody else's Christmas gift, when God will give you to brighten the home of some good man and not that of a lonely old maid like me. And I know you will tell me when the message comes to you, darling."

Bertha said nothing in reply, but only hid her face in Margaret's lap as she knelt beside her. And Margaret looked down on her and thought much, and was glad, for it had been the desire of her heart for many a long day—since she had watched them together as boy and girl.

But there was one person at least who did not echo her wish, and that was John Lingwood. He had schemed and plotted and kept his counsel all the years, and yet, strangely enough, it had never dawned

upon him that there might be opposition from this quarter until just at the time with which we are dealing. He had always looked upon Lawrence Gray as more or less of a boy, and he was quite taken aback when Colonel Carr-Mathers said to him one day:

"That pupil of yours—young Gray—seems very fond of Rundleham."

"Oh yes, he's partial to boating, and, besides, he likes to run over to practise on the organ with Miss Kingslake."

"Umph. You think that's all; eh?"

"Well, he's a bit of a botanist, you know, and the marshes are a happy hunting-ground for flowers."

"And there's just one flower that he'll be carrying off one of these days," said the Colonel with a grin.

"What do you mean?"

"You'd better find out, Lingwood. I wonder you haven't noticed it already. But there! a man who grinds away at musty old law like you do hasn't any love affairs of his own and can't see other people's."

Love affairs! How blind he had been! The conversation had taken place in the Colonel's study one Saturday afternoon, and as the lawyer came out of the house he knit his brows in anger and clasped his riding-whip fiercely. Saturday was always a half-holiday at the office, and he remembered that he had seen Lawrence leaving the town on his bicycle just before he started riding over. What a fool he was! A burst of hatred rose within his breast as he mounted his horse and rode down the path. He reined up for a moment to take one sweeping view of the fine old house and grounds, and ejaculated as he did so:

"The young hound! I must see into this. I wonder whether he is in Rundleham to-day, and what he is doing. I'll find out before I leave."

He rode on into the village and put up his horse at the inn, then he started in the direction of Sea View Cottage. The nearest way was through the churchyard, and as he strode with quick steps past the graves he heard the sound of the organ from within. He paused a moment at the open door. Perhaps some memory of his younger days flashed before him as he stood there. It was a composition of Mozart's that Margaret used to play.

"Perhaps he is only practising with Margaret," he muttered. "I'll look and see."

He stepped softly into the church and looked towards the chancel. Seated upon the organ-stool, lost in the beauty of the music he was playing, was Lawrence Gray. And standing behind him, with a glow on her beautiful face, just touched by the long ray of light that shot across the church from the western window, was Bertha Noel. He was playing for her, and she knew it. The impassioned swelling of the deep-toned organ breathed love as he touched the keys.

With a loud, clattering step, with the jingle of his spurs, the lawyer advanced up the nave. Lawrence Gray stopped suddenly as he heard him coming, and the music died away. There was no trace of his feelings on John Lingwood's face as he greeted Bertha pleasantly and nodded to Gray.

"I had to come over this afternoon to see the Colonel," he said, "and I was coming on to you when the organ attracted me. Don't let me interrupt you, Gray. I've got an hour to spare before I go back, Bertha. Can you come for a stroll with me down to the beach?"

"Certainly," she replied, with a half-reluctant look at Lawrence. "I can go with you now. Are you coming in to tea, Lawrence?" she added.

"Yes; I think so."

"All right," said Lingwood, "I'll come too if I may, and then we can ride back together—if my horse of flesh and blood can keep pace with your iron steed. Come along, Bertha."

They walked down to the sea together. He did not even mention Lawrence. He knew well that he had a difficult game to play, and that he stood a chance of losing it if he made the attack too bluntly. And as yet he had no plan to go upon; it had been sprung upon him so suddenly.

He chatted affably as they walked along. Presently they turned from the sea towards the old sluice and crossed it.

"I never come here," he said, "without thinking of that morning when I found a poor little child half dead with cold. And now," he added, laying his hand on her shoulder as they stood looking over the marshes, "she is a child no longer. And she has repaid me for finding her."

"O John," said the girl, "you have been

awfully good to me. I don't think I can ever repay you or Sissy for your kindness. To think what I might have been but for you!"

"My dear child," he said gravely, "there are many ways in which you can repay us both, and me especially. I have watched over you all these years. I have tried to fulfil the trust which God put into my hands when He led me over the marshes, and I want you always to look upon me as your guardian."

"Of course I shall," she replied; "and I always want to do what will please you."

"I know. Now I'm older and wiser than you; quite ancient, eh, Bertha?"

He looked at her as he spoke, with his hearty laugh and fresh, honest-looking face.

"You're not a bit old, John! You're just my big, elder brother; that's all. Though you're a very wise brother, with your dreadful law, you know."

"It is because I am wiser and older than you, Bertha, that I want you to promise never to do anything, anything serious, I mean—without telling me about it first. You are a woman now, but it does not follow that you need a guardian less than when you roamed over the marshes as a child—when I pulled you out of this dreadful sluice! Now, Miss Kingslake is a dear, kind-hearted creature, but——"

"Don't you say a word against Sissy. I won't hear it—even from you."

"I wouldn't say a word against her for the world. You didn't let me finish. Miss Kingslake has lived in this little village nearly all her life, and she hasn't got that knowledge of the world that I have had to gain, Bertha. I envy her from the bottom of my heart, but men have to learn these things. And that is why I want you always to take me into your confidence and to ask for my guidance. Have I not a right?"

"Yes, John, you have." She was looking down on the ground now, with a tinge of heightened colour in her cheek. Presently she raised her eyes to his and said:

"I promise you that I will never do anything serious without telling you first. You and Sissy shall always share my confidence while you have a right to it, for I know you both have my happiness at heart. And you are so strong and good besides being wise, and will always tell me what is right to do, won't you?"

"I will try, my dear child. And you must remember that the right thing is not always the pleasant thing, and that the wise man of the world sees farther and deeper than you do—or even than Miss Kingslake."

He spoke gravely, and a strange feeling of foreboding seized her as she looked at him with a puzzled expression. But whatever she might have been about to say he turned it off as he suddenly relapsed once more into his usual blunt, hearty demeanour, and before they had retraced their steps very far she had forgotten it. When they reached the Cottage she was as lively as ever, nor did she notice the care John Lingwood took that young Gray should be seated near Margaret and that they should both leave the house together.

He was more silent than usual as he rode home with his pupil. But then it is always difficult to keep up a lively conversation between a horseman and a cyclist. And Lawrence Gray did not notice it. His thoughts were elsewhere. He was thinking of the fair, smiling face of Bertha as he had seen it that afternoon when he glanced over his shoulder as he was playing. And a dream of romance floated through his thoughts. Bertha Noel—the Christmas gift! He would ask for her as such on the anniversary of her especial day—Christmas Eve. It would soon be here now, in less than a fortnight, and then! He pictured it to himself again and again. He never doubted for a moment what the answer would be. His old boyish love for her had grown strong and true during the years, and now he felt it was the love of a man—a love that would be received and returned.

He was very, very happy. While John Lingwood and Bertha were strolling down to the sea he had left the organ and gone back to the little cottage. And he had unburdened to the sweet, gentle friend of his boyhood something of his thoughts and dreams, and Margaret had smiled quietly upon him and had told him in a few earnest words that it was her dearest wish to see them both happy. All the world was bright to him. He scarcely noticed the cries of the boys who were shouting out the evening papers: "Another British disaster:

terrible slaughter!" For it was that awful time, just before the Christmas of 1899, when England was cut to the heart as perhaps she had never been before, and in palace and cottage women were mourning for their fallen kindred, and men were setting their faces with grim determination to "see this thing through."

When the lawyer entered his house that evening the servant told him that a visitor was waiting to see him.

"On business?"

"Yes, sir."

"But you know I never see any one on Saturdays unless it is very urgent."

"He said it was most particular, sir, and he must see you."

"Where is he?"

"In the waiting-room, sir."

John Lingwood stalked down to the little room into which clients were shown. He was in no good temper. He had been very much ruffled that afternoon, and his face did not look encouraging to a client. Nor was he inclined to be in a better frame of mind when he saw who the intruder was.

Standing in front of the fire was a coarse, bloated-looking man, dressed in a very large-patterned check suit with a horsey cut, and with ugly thick lips and close-cropped hair. The lawyer recognised him as one of the lowest characters in the town, the keeper of a questionable public-house, with a reputation as a gambler and a money-lender in a small way—a destroyer of the reputations of youth generally.

"Now, look here, Marks," he began angrily, "it's no use bringing your dirty business troubles to me. I'm not going to take up any case of yours, so you may as well be off at once."

"All right, Mr. Lingwood," answered the man with a hoarse voice. "I ain't come to consult you. Leastways, it ain't a matter of business between you and me."

"What is it, then?"

"I hates splitting on a cove, but it's getting a bit too thick, and I told him I should have to tell you if he didn't stump up this week, and he ain't, neither."

"Who are you talking about?"

"It's like this, Mr. Lingwood: your clerk, Roger Kemp, is a bad lot. I calls it downright dishonest the way he's treated me."

"What has he done?"

"Done? Why, he's lost money, that's what he's done, and he's borrowed off me till I ain't goin' to stand it no longer."

"That's your look-out if you choose to be such a fool as to lend it," replied the lawyer coolly.

"I've got his I O U for fifty pounds," cried Marks, bringing his fist down on the table, "and I've been holdin' it for too long. I'm a-goin' to have the law on him next week, that's what I'm a-goin' to do, and I've told him so too."

"Well," said Lingwood, "and what has that to do with me?"

"What's it to do with you? Well, look 'ere, guv'nor, you don't want a scandal, do you? It wouldn't be very pleasant for folks to see your head clerk's name in the paper, eh? What I was goin' to propose——"

"I know exactly what you mean, you scoundrel," broke in Lingwood. "You think I'm going to pay to hush it up. Well, I'm not. If Kemp chooses to play the fool he must stand the consequences. No! not another word. Now, then, off you go!"

With a muttered oath the man took his departure. He had reckoned without his host.

The latter was annoyed beyond measure. With all his failings outside the office, Roger Kemp was a valuable clerk, but still, he did not feel inclined to pay fifty pounds to save him. But this worry was as nothing compared with the other thoughts that troubled the lawyer's brain. Many a pipe he smoked that night, many a plan he schemed, but no amply satisfying solution could he arrive at.

"So far chance has favoured me," he exclaimed at length, "and it seems I must trust to chance still. Perhaps one will come."

It was to come sooner than he thought. If fortune favours the brave, chance often favours the wicked.

So he went to bed and dreamed that he was kneeling upon Lawrence Gray and throttling him. It was a pleasant dream. He was quite sorry when he awoke.

CHAPTER VI

THERE were three rooms in general use on the ground-floor of the lawyer's house, besides the one in which clients waited. The first of these, Lingwood's private sanctum, has

already been described. Then there was a larger office used by Roger Kemp and the junior clerks, of which latter there was only one at this time. The other room was set apart for the articled pupil, Lawrence Gray, and contained the usual office furniture, of which the desk was the most prominent feature.

It was considered a good thing in Burchester for a young man to get his articles from Lingwood. The lawyer took great pains with his pupils and gave them as much practical work as possible. For this reason it was his custom to entrust the petty cash to Gray and to make him responsible for the payment of the various smaller items connected with the practice. He was a very methodical man, and regularly every Monday morning he looked over Gray's petty cash book in his private office, and, if necessary, wrote out a cheque for the latter to get cashed for the payments of the ensuing week.

He was sitting at his desk, checking the items in Gray's book. The young man was standing in front of him, and Roger Kemp was just about to enter the office to receive certain instructions.

"Well," said the lawyer when he had finished, "I suppose you will want about five pounds, eh?"

"Better make it six," replied Gray; "there are those stamps, you know."

It was at this precise moment that the clerk came in.

"All right," he answered, taking his chequebook and writing out a cheque for six pounds, payable to self, as was his habit. He tore out the cheque, blotted it, endorsed it on the back, and folded it in two. He was always exact and methodical in these matters.

"You won't have time to go to the bank this morning," he went on as he handed the cheque to Gray. "I want you to come with me to the court directly I have finished with Kemp, so you'd better send Davis to get it cashed."

Davis was the junior clerk.

"Very well," replied Gray; "I'll see about it in a few minutes."

It was a thing that had happened dozens of times before. The lawyer gave a few brief orders to Roger Kemp, and the latter went back to his office. A minute later John Lingwood popped his head inside the door.

"By the way," he said, "mind you get those letters away before the next post."

"Yes, sir. We're out of stamps."

"Get a shillingsworth then, and I'll pay you back. Look sharp, Gray," he shouted, "we shall be late."

Gray came running into the office, the cheque and the key of his desk in his hand.

"Here, Davis," he said, "run to the bank presently and get this cashed. You can lock up the money in my desk and give me the key this afternoon."

"Yes, sir."

Gray laid the cheque, still folded, and the key beside the clerk, and followed the lawyer out. Meanwhile Roger Kemp, who had been watching what was occurring, grew suddenly pale and dropped the pen he was holding. Something had flashed across his mind.

"Davis," he said, just as the youth was taking up the cheque, "you'd better get those stamps at once. Here's a shilling. They'll let you have them at the tobacconist's over the way."

"All right," replied Davis, getting off his stool and taking down his hat.

The instant he had gone Roger Kemp rapidly crossed the office and seized the cheque that was lying on the other's desk. He glanced over it searchingly. It was made out in John Lingwood's usual clear, small writing, for six pounds. Then he dipped a pen in the ink and quickly, but carefully, added a "t" and a "y" after the "six" in the same handwriting, and a "o" after the "6." He held it by the fire for a second to half dry before he blotted it, and replaced it; and then, when Davis returned, after an absence of less than half a minute, he found the senior clerk hard at work at his desk, just as he had left him.

"I'll go and get that cheque cashed now," he said, as soon as he had given Kemp the stamps.

"All right. Don't be long. There's a lot to get through."

He took up the cheque, still without looking at it, and went out. Just before he entered the bank he glanced at the figures.

"Sixty pounds!" he murmured. "The governor wants a lot of petty cash this morning."

"How will you have it?" asked the cashier as he turned the cheque over and read the well-known signature.

"I don't know," replied Davis. "Mr. Gray didn't say."

"Better take ten in gold and the rest in notes. Here you are. Have a bag for it?"

"Thanks," and he put the money into the little brown-paper bag the cashier gave him and returned to the office. As soon as he had hung up his hat he went into Gray's room, put the money into his desk, locked it and pocketed the key.

Roger Kemp was writing letters at a tremendous pace. He was a very swift man with his pen, in ordinary correspondence, copying, and shorthand, and it was this that made him, among other things, a valuable clerk. Presently he had a row of addressed, sealed, and stamped envelopes in front of him.

"I'll run out and post them," he said; "I shan't be long."

He went out into the passage and shut the door. Then he opened the outer door and slammed it hard. But he still remained within the passage. Slipping off his elastic-sided boots he crept into Gray's room. Long ago a duplicate key of Gray's desk had been lost, but Roger Kemp had never said that he had found it. It might come in useful, some day, he thought. It did on this occasion. Softly he put it into the keyhole and opened the desk. In another minute there were only six sovereigns left in the little paper bag. The rest of the money was in his breast-pocket along with the letters which he did not post.

A minute later and Davis heard the street door open once more, and Roger Kemp re-entered the office. Both of them remained working there until Lingwood and Gray came back from the police court. Then Davis handed the key to Lawrence Gray, and he and Kemp went out together to their lunch.

And the latter just caught the post after all, but Davis did not see him put the letters in.

Roger Kemp went to bed that night with a strange mixture of feelings. On the one hand he had saved himself, on the other he had ruined another man.

"And serve him right," he told the guilty conscience that *would* worry him, "the canting hypocrite!"

For Gray had more than once given him a little friendly lecture on certain rumours, and he had resented it.

But there was just one rather weak point in the whole scheme, otherwise cleverly devised, that had escaped the observation of the head clerk.

The next morning John Lingwood had to go into the town. As he was walking along the street he felt a tap on the arm. He turned, and saw Marks, grinning with great glee.

"What do you want?" he said sharply.

"It's all right, Mr. Lingwood, sir. Don't you think nothin' of what I said about Mr. Kemp the other night. He's done the handsome thing and paid up on the nail."

"Paid, has he?" asked the lawyer.

"Yes; look here, guv'nor," and the man drew out a pocket-book, opened it, and displayed a little bundle of notes, which he waved triumphantly. "Fifty pound—every penny of it. I'm sorry I said anything agen the gentleman."

The lawyer glanced curiously at the money. As he did so he saw something that aroused his suspicions. They were new Bank of England notes, but they bore the familiar stamp of the Burchester Bank upon them. He only wished the man a curt good morning, however, and walked on, wondering much how Roger Kemp could have obtained all these notes from the bank. It seemed so curious to him that he went into the bank and asked the cashier if he had paid any notes recently to his clerk.

"Certainly; only yesterday, when we cashed the cheque he brought."

"Who brought it—Mr. Kemp?"

"No; your other clerk. Davis is his name, isn't it?"

"Exactly. But how came you to give him notes?"

"It was a sixty pound cheque, I think, Mr. Lingwood."

"Oh!" replied the lawyer, without betraying the slightest emotion. "Allow me to see it, please."

The cheque was produced and John Lingwood examined it closely. Still he kept his own counsel.

"Thank you. I'll take it with me."

"Nothing wrong, I hope, Mr. Lingwood?"

"I don't know yet. Good morning."

On the steps of the bank he met Marks coming in.

"I'm a-goin' to change this here little fortune into gold," he said. His speech was thick, and he had evidently been drinking slightly to make him so familiar.

"Stop a bit," replied Lingwood affably. "I want some notes myself. Suppose I give you fifty sovereigns for them?"

"All right," said the man. "I don't care as long as I gets change."

"Very well then; wait here a minute."

He re-entered the bank, wrote out a cheque, and drew fifty pounds in gold. Then he came outside and gave them to Marks, receiving the notes for them.

As soon as John Lingwood got back to his office he sent for Davis to come into his private room.

"Mr. Gray gave you a cheque yesterday to change?"

"Yes, sir."

"How much was it?"

"Sixty pounds, sir."

"Ah! You took it to the bank yourself?"

"Yes, sir."

"How did they pay you?"

"Fifty in notes and ten in gold."

"And then what did you do with it?"

"I took the money straight into Mr. Gray's room and locked it in his desk. You saw me give him the key when you both came in."

"Did any one else go into that room?"

"No, sir; not that I know of."

"Very well. Please to say nothing of this to any one. Mind, if I hear of your doing so I shall dismiss you instantly. You hear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Send Mr. Gray to me."

Lawrence came in, suspecting nothing.

"Gray, how much was the amount of that cheque I wrote out for the petty cash yesterday?"

"Six pounds."

"Oh! Did you find the money safely in your desk?"

"Yes, of course."

"How much?"

"Why, six pounds," said the young man, greatly bewildered.

"Perhaps you can explain this, then," and he handed him the cancelled cheque.

"Why, what is the meaning of this?" he gasped as the figures dawned upon him.

"Forgery!" snapped the lawyer.

"Forgery?"

"Exactly. I want a serious explanation of this, Gray."

"Of course you do, sir; but what have I to do with it?"

"And I want that explanation from you," he went on coldly.

Poor Lawrence turned ashy pale. He was staggered with the blow.

"Do you mean," he cried hotly, "that you suspect me?"

"Circumstances are against you. Davis has just told me that you gave him a cheque for sixty pounds and that he placed that sum in your desk. And the cashier at the bank paid him the amount, I know; so you will confess that the inference is very obvious. It is very painful for me to have to say this, Gray, and no one will be more delighted than I if you can clear yourself."

"I swear I know nothing about it, Mr. Lingwood. Can you imagine that I should ever stoop to such a thing?"

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders.

"That is no explanation," he said. "Look here, Gray," he went on more kindly, "I don't want to be hard on you. No one knows of this thing but you and I, and no one need know it. Come, for the sake of your manhood, make a clean breast of it. Take time to think it over. I shall take no steps against you. I wouldn't for the world."

"And I shall insist upon it that you do!" cried the young man. "Do you imagine I am going to have a charge like this made against me and am going to keep it secret? If you don't take steps, then I shall."

"As a friend I advise you not to. The evidence is too strong, Gray. No; I won't hear another word now. Go and think it over."

Half mad with pain and anger, Lawrence Gray dashed out of the room. A gentle smile played on the lips of the lawyer as he heard the front door slam. Then he summoned Roger Kemp.

In a few words he told him of the forgery and showed him the cheque, watching him closely as he did so. The clerk was apparently astounded.

"Oh, sir," he said, "do you think it could

have been Mr. Gray? Might not it have been Davis who altered——"

"I am sure it was Gray," said Lingwood emphatically.

"Well, sir, I should be sorry to believe it, but——"

He stopped short. The lawyer was eyeing him with a peculiar look that frightened him. And he held in his hand a bundle of notes.

"Roger Kemp," he said slowly, with a terrible stress on each word as he brought it out, "do you recognise these notes? I think you do. You gave them to a scoundrel named Marks last evening in exchange for an I O U. Earlier in the day these same notes were paid over by the bank to Davis. Now then!"

The wretched man dropped on his knees.

"For God's sake, sir," he murmured, "have mercy—I will tell you everything—I——"

"Stop, you miserable wretch. I don't want to hear you. I have evidence enough to give you five years' penal servitude. You have been a clumsy blockhead. Now, look here, Kemp. You are a good clerk, but you are too inquisitive. I know you and your prying ways. There are some things that you know a great deal too much about. But I fancy from this day forward you'll serve me with fear and trembling. For remember that at any moment I have the power of ruining your life, and I shall not scruple to use it if I think fit. Go back to your work."

"Shall you—shall you tell Mr. Gray that I—I——?"

"That you forged this cheque? You're a fool, Kemp. I told you just now that I was sure it was Gray. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir," replied Kemp, as the meaning of the lawyer's words flashed across him. And he went back to his office, realising that he was bound, body and soul, to his master. The latter had planned it carefully. He knew well that it was wiser to take Kemp into his confidence and show him the power he held, rather than to allow any chance to crop up that might clear Lawrence Gray.

He rubbed his hands with exultation. The laws of chance had ruled the planets in his favour. All was plain sailing now.

In vain Gray tried to clear himself of the awful charge. He consulted another lawyer, who told him flatly that he would have no chance against the overwhelming mass of evidence against him. Lingwood refused to prosecute, even to see him after he had returned once to protest that he was innocent. He was nearly mad with despair. He felt too miserable for the first few days to go over to Rundleham.

Meanwhile the astute John Lingwood had paid an early visit to the village. He called at the cottage and found Margaret and Bertha both at home. He purposely seemed very gloomy and depressed, and at length Bertha asked him if he were unwell.

"No," he replied, "but I'm terribly worried."

"What about; business, John?"

"No—it's really about young Gray."

"What is the matter?" asked Bertha quickly.

"Oh, I don't think I ought to say. He's left now, and the thing's at an end."

"Left you?" echoed Margaret. "I did not know his articles had expired."

"Nor have they. But certain circumstances arose which made it imperative for me to cancel them. But I would prefer not to say why."

"I think we have a right to know why, Mr. Lingwood," said Margaret. "Lawrence Gray is a great friend of mine—and of Bertha's too. If there is anything wrong, please tell us at once."

"Yes," said Bertha in a low voice; "I think you ought to tell us, John."

"It is a very painful matter," he answered. "I would give anything to believe it untrue. I have done all I can. You will be the first outside my office to know anything about it, and even my clerks have no idea of the truth." And he told them the whole story.

"I don't believe it!" exclaimed Margaret as soon as he had finished, "and I never will believe it. Lawrence a forger? No! And if you have any love for the truth left in you, you will move heaven and earth to prove him innocent."

His eyes dropped before the flash of hers.

"I wish I could," he said.

"O John," said Bertha, "it can't be true. No, it can't be true."

"It is not true, Bertha," said Margaret still more hotly. "You never believe it is, child, surely?"

"I don't know what to believe," sobbed

Bertha. "John wouldn't say these things were there no reason for them—and——"

"I care nothing for what Mr. Lingwood says," interrupted Margaret, standing up and looking at them both with a touch of scorn in her grand eyes; "I am the poor lad's friend, and I know that he is innocent, however black the case may be against him, however strong the evidence, John Lingwood. I would sooner believe that you were a villain than that Lawrence should be guilty, and God knows it goes to my heart to say that."

"You don't suppose I'd forge my own cheque," he said with an uncomfortable laugh.

"O Sissy, I wish I could only think as you do," began Bertha.

But Margaret was gone. She had swept out of the room in indignation, leaving them alone.

"Poor Miss Kingslake," said John Lingwood. "I'm afraid it has upset her terribly. I wish he were as innocent as she thinks him. If only he could clear himself! Now, Bertha," he added gently, "I'm very sorry, for your sake, because he's an old playfellow of yours. And I've tried to screen him as well as I can. It need never become public unless he chooses, for I shall say nothing about it—except, perhaps, to Colonel Carr-Mathers, who is sure to ask me what is the matter when he finds Gray has left me."

"Do you really think nothing can be done?"

"I fear not. If even he would confess the truth I would willingly forgive him and say no more about it."

"You are very generous," she said. "I'm sorry Sissy spoke like that to you."

"My dear Bertha, it is nothing. She does not understand. She thinks, because I make this accusation, that I am hard-hearted and prejudiced against the poor fellow. But God knows it has gone against the grain sorely to do it."

"I'm sure it has. You have done the right thing. Thank you for telling me, John. You—you don't know——"

"Come," he said quickly, "you mustn't take it too much to heart, though I know it is hard to have to lose faith in those we trusted. Good-bye, Bertha. I'm very, very sorry about it."

He held her hand in his as he said the words. She bit her lip slightly.

"Oh," she said, "we must try and forget it. You will, I know."

"I shall never refer to it again."

"I think you have acted the part of a just and honourable man—a difficult part. You have been his friend, I am sure; good-bye, John."

The girl had managed to control herself until he was gone. She had received the shock almost calmly, but the iron had entered none the less deeply into her soul. She stood gazing out of the window, now, erect and silent, her face set firm, but a tear gathering nevertheless in her eyes. The idol was shattered—the blow had been struck at once and for all. It was the first time that she had ever drained the cup of sorrow to the dregs. The only other great grief she had felt was the death of the Vicar, years before, but that was only the passing away of an old man—not like this!

And as she gazed over the distant marshes the cold hand of agony gripped her heart more closely, crushed it and crushed it, until at length almost a smile of scorn quivered on her lips. John Lingwood's villainy had conquered.

"Poor Bertha! I am very, very sorry."

She had not noticed Margaret returning. The sweet, sympathetic voice fell upon her ear suddenly, and she turned.

"But I am sure he is innocent," went on Margaret.

"Please don't mention him any more."

The voice was cold and harsh. The girl had steeled herself.

Margaret took her hand.

"To-morrow," she said, "is Christmas Eve. Do you remember?"

"Yes."

"I had hoped that to-morrow would have brought a new joy into your life, dear—it is your own day. Do not let it dawn with the thoughts that you harbour now. Will you not at least try to believe that all will be right yet?"

"I think you are unkind to talk like this. My mind is made up. I trust John implicitly, and I must believe him."

"I am sorry."

"You need not be. It is better to know the truth—in time."

Not another word did Margaret say to the proud-spirited girl. That night she thought long and deeply over the past. And the

man who was uppermost in her thoughts was John Lingwood.

"Strange," she murmured, "I cannot understand it all. I loved him so well, and I could never believe ill of him—even now. Oh, what, what is at the bottom of all this mystery of life that confounds me? It seems such a riddle. Poor Bertha! I wish she thought Lawrence innocent. I know he is."

CHAPTER VII

CHRISTMAS EVE fell on a Sunday that year. Lawrence Gray cycled over to Rundleham in the afternoon. It was the first visit he had paid to the village since the terrible charge that had been made against him by Lingwood. He had made up his mind to keep to his resolution of asking Bertha to be his wife that day, though, of course, he meant to tell her all that had happened, never doubting for a moment that both she and Margaret would believe in him. As to his future prospects, he had scarcely had time to think of them in the worry of the past week. He knew that, unless he cleared himself, his career as a solicitor was gone for ever, but he still hoped that his innocence would be established.

The servant at the Cottage told him that Miss Kingslake was playing the organ at the children's service, and that Bertha had gone for a walk—she thought over the marshes. So he left his bicycle there and started towards the sluice in the hope of meeting her. It was a warm afternoon, quite oppressive for the time of year, and very dull withal. He walked along the little path across the meadows wrapt in deep thought and feeling very miserable. He had tried hard to bear this burden manfully, but the trial was an awful one, and he longed sorely for sympathy. There was a stile at the end of the second meadow, but not before he was close to it did he raise his eyes. Then he saw Bertha Noel sitting upon it, her back towards him.

She heard his step and turned her head to see who it was. The moment she recognised him she jumped down from her seat and stood on the other side of the stile, her eyes averted from him.

He raised his hat.

"Good afternoon," he said; "a happy Christmas."

She bowed icily, never looking at him.

"I thought I might find you somewhere about here," he went on.

"Indeed," she replied coldly, "you need not have troubled."

"Why? What is the matter?"

"I think you must know."

"I suppose you have been hearing this abominable lie about me," he blurted out, for he saw the truth in that scornful expression of hers.

"Mr. Lingwood has been here. Is it necessary for me to say more?"

"And you have believed this foul slander? You think that I am what he chooses to call me! O Bertha, Bertha, I did not expect this."

He was angry. Poor fellow, it was the one cruel blow that crushed in a moment the calm attitude he had been trying so hard to maintain.

"And I," she exclaimed with a touch of indignation in her voice, "did not expect that you would dare—yes, dare—to come here as if nothing had happened. I don't want to see you or speak to you unless you can explain and prove your innocence to Mr. Lingwood. Surely you must see that for yourself!"

"I have told him I cannot, I——"

"Then why come here? Why——"

"I will tell you why I came here, Bertha. I came to take you into my confidence as a friend—so I thought. I had hoped that at least you would never have given credence to this slander. I don't care what Lingwood has told you——"

"But I do care. I cannot doubt his word——"

"And I came here," went on the young man, interrupting her, "I came here for another reason, and though you scorn and doubt me I will say what it is. You shall hear me, Bertha. I came here to tell you of the love I have felt for you all these years—yes, since we roamed as children together over the marshes yonder. I came here to-day to ask you to return that love, to ask you to be my wife, to believe in me and to trust me in spite of all that has happened. I declare to you, before God, that I am innocent. Bertha, won't you believe me? Won't you give me a ray of hope?"

She stepped back from the stile, her face pale with passion.

"'How dare you insult me like this?'"

"How dare you insult me like this?" she said. "How dare you come and tell me such things—you—a forger!"

He started and clenched his teeth. It was an awful moment for him.

"Bertha," he said in a strange low tone, "I came to tell you this, and I have done it. Before this charge was brought against me I had meant to ask you to be my wife on this Christmas Eve, the anniversary of that day that gave you your name, the——"

"My name, eh? Oh, you taunt me, do you? You look upon me as the pauper child picked up off the marshes, I suppose! I may be a nameless woman—a mere foundling, but at least I am above being patronised by a thief, Lawrence Gray!"

"I did not mean that. You know I did not. I love you——"

"Not another word, Mr. Gray. Perhaps you have a grain of honour left. If so, go! I never wish to see you again. You have passed out of my life for ever, and thank God Mr. Lingwood gave me the warning. No, I will hear no more!"

And she turned on her heel and walked away towards the marshes with never another look at him. He sprang to the stile, and was about to climb over and follow her, but he restrained himself, and stood there watching her retreating form, biting his lip and praying for patience.

And as he walked back across the meadows any one meeting him and looking at him might have said, "This man is passing through the fire."

Mechanically he retraced his steps to the Cottage, opened the gate, and laid hands on his bicycle like one in a dream. He would have started home at once, but the door opened and a voice exclaimed:

"My poor boy! Come in and have some tea, and tell me all about it."

And the next moment Margaret's hand grasped his, and he saw tears of compassion standing in her eyes as he looked into that sad sweet face.

"I think I know what has happened," she said, as she led him inside; "the maid told me you had gone to meet her. Lawrence, I am very, very sorry for you."

"You don't believe——" he began.

"Of course I don't. Not for a moment."

"Thank God!"

"And I think she is very blind and foolish."

He shook his head mournfully.

"I never thought that she——"

"I know. Be brave, Lawrence. It is an awful trial for you. But you have the right on your side."

She did not say very much to him, but what she did say was simple, earnest comfort. She told him that she believed the day must come when he would be cleared. She asked him a few questions about the trouble, and agreed with him that the evidence against him appeared most convincing.

"Sometimes I think it must be a conspiracy," he said.

"It is very strange. And what are you going to do?"

"I don't know yet. But I shall leave Burchester; I couldn't stay there—especially now."

"Well," she said, "tell me your plans when you have made them. And remember you have always a friend in me, Lawrence."

"I know I have. Do you think that she—that Bertha—will ever——?"

"My dear boy, we must wait and trust. God will help the right."

"It seems so very hard, just at Christmas."

"No! Christ was born to be a Man of Sorrows, to be an Example in troubles. It is not strange that Christmas should sometimes bring us sadness. The greatest grief of my own life, Lawrence, is bound up with this very day."

"I should not have thought you had seen much trouble," he answered, "you are always so calm and happy."

"Ah! when you are older you will understand more. Good-bye, dear boy. God bless you!"

He mounted his bicycle and rode slowly off. Presently he passed the lodge-gates of Rundleham Court. The old Colonel had tottered down from the house and was standing on the path just outside. Gray jumped off his machine with a sudden impulse.

"Good afternoon, Colonel," he began.

The Colonel stared at him hard, and then turned on his heel and shuffled off without a word.

"Lingwood has been there too!" groaned the young man as he remounted his bicycle. "I can't stand this sort of thing any longer."

Before he reached Burchester he had developed a plan of action. Ten days later he wrote to Margaret Kingslake.

"You will not be very much surprised to hear, perhaps, that I have been accepted for the Yeomanry and am leaving soon for South Africa. I shall try and run over to see you before I start. Perhaps it is a cowardly thing to do, but I felt I must get away from it all at any cost. At all events there will be work and duty—and perhaps a bullet at the end of it. I don't much care if there is."

Margaret sighed as she read the letter. She told Bertha quietly what Lawrence had done, but the girl gave her no answer.

He came over to say good-bye. Bertha had gone out, purposely. He had only a few minutes to spare and his parting with Margaret was brief.

"You will write," he said, "if there is any good news?"

"I will write in any case, and so must you. I know you'll do your duty, Lawrence, and I hope you will come home safe."

"I don't care if I never come back now."

"That is foolish. Good-bye! Remember there is one friend in the old country!"

There was more than one. As he walked away from the Cottage in his khaki uniform he met old Harry Ward.

"What, Master Lawrence! Be you a-goin' to fight them 'ere Boers?"

"I hope so."

"I'll 'low 'tis a rough bit o' work you've got before you. Master Lawrence, sir, beggin' your pardon, I've heered something about you. I don't know 'zactly what 'tis, but Miss Kingslake told me you was in trouble. And I'm sorry for ye, sir. I often thinks o' the times you and Miss Bertha used to go out in th' old boat along o' me, and I'm crooel hurt to think as there was anything the matter."

"It's very kind of you to say so."

"Beggin' your pardon agen, sir, but is it anything to do with Mr. Lingwood?"

"It is."

"I don't trust him. I never have. Take my word for it, sir, he ain't worth grieving over. That's what I told Miss Margaret years ago."

"You told her? Why?"

"She was engaged to him once, sir."

"Engaged?"

"Ay. It pretty nigh broke her heart to part with him, I know's it did. But 'twas for the best. I'm sure 'twas. Good-bye,

sir. I hope your trouble 'll come to an end some day, please God, whatever 'tis."

The young man shook his hand heartily. He understood now that Margaret had suffered.

"What on earth could have made him give up a woman like that?" he asked himself; "she must have been very beautiful once!"

What, indeed? The answer was to come soon, and the answer was to come in a manner that the lawyer had never anticipated. It seems sometimes that God withdraws His Providence from the affairs of men for years, and lets them go on following their own sweet will, planning, building, acquiring and the like, and then suddenly His finger is stretched forth and men's work is touched by a stronger hand than theirs. The building crumbles. The planning of years collapses.

On that very Christmas Eve that Lawrence Gray was rejected the tide had begun to turn, imperceptibly at first, just as on the Rundleham Beach it was impossible to tell for half an hour after high water that the tide was really going down, that the hidden things of the deep were soon to be uncovered.

Colonel Carr-Mathers, after deliberately cutting Lawrence Gray, turned him round and shuffled once more into the road, just as there came a little springing figure humming a tune and looking for all the world like a gnome going to his revels. It was old Harry Ward, dressed in his Sunday best, taking his afternoon stroll.

He touched his hat to the Colonel, who stopped him and spoke to him for a moment about the weather. Now the fisherman had just been filling his pipe, and as the Colonel talked to him he put it in his mouth and mechanically pulled his match-box out. It was, of course, his particular Sunday one. As he did so the Colonel's eye fell upon it. He gave a sudden start and turned very pale.

"Will you let me look at that match-box, Ward?" he asked.

"Cert'nly, sir," replied the fisherman, handing it to him.

He examined it eagerly.

"Where did you get this from?" he asked.

"Picked it up, sir, on the marshes, years ago now."

"On the marshes? Whereabouts on the marshes, tell me?"

"Why, 'twas close by where Mr. Lingwood found Miss Noel and her poor mother, sir."

"Was it then that you picked it up?"

"No, sir; years after that."

"Strange!" muttered the Colonel. "Would you part with this box?" he asked presently.

"You're welcome to it, sir," replied the old man promptly; "leastways you've a right to it, seein' it was found on the marshes."

The Colonel was Lord of the Manor. That is what Ward meant.

"Thank you, my man," he said, "but I should like to give you something in exchange for it," and he put a couple of sovereigns into Ward's hand.

"Good day!" he snapped, and turned away, leaving the fisherman astonished; for the Colonel was a close man, and it was not often that the villagers received a gift from him.

As for Colonel Carr-Mathers, he walked slowly and painfully back to his house, his head bowed down and his brows knit. And when he was inside his house he sat for many minutes, holding the match-box in his hand and gazing at it.

"I gave it to him when he was but a boy," he muttered, "and now it has been found on the marshes. Could it have been lost by him there years ago—before it all happened—or can my suspicions be correct? The likeness is strange—I have often remarked it."

He opened a drawer in his desk and took out a faded photograph. It was that of a young man of some twenty years of age, handsome—with an unmistakable resemblance to the Colonel.

"Ah," he said, "you ruined yourself and I swore I would never forgive you—or yours. And I never will, for you blasted my life as well. Yes, it may be true, but I shall say no word. Let the dead past bury its dead—if it can!"

Nevertheless the thing had moved him, for he was growing feeble. A week later he had to send for his doctor. The latter shook his head.

"Tell me the worst," said the Colonel; "I'm an old soldier, and I'm not afraid to hear it."

"Oh, you must keep your spirits up, and——"

"Don't talk nonsense; out with it!"

"Well, you've had a slight stroke and your nerves are upset, and you're not so young as you were."

"Is it serious?"

"It is serious."

"Umph. Shall I live through this year?"

"Possibly."

"Probably?"

"No. And in any case you must be very careful. Any unwonted excitement or exertion may hasten matters."

When John Lingwood heard of this a gleam of joy shone for a moment in his eyes and he smiled to himself. Things were prospering with the lawyer. Obstacle after obstacle was being removed from his path, clearing the way for the purpose that was locked up in the iron safe. Everything was coming right and the end was almost in sight now. As for Roger Kemp, the lawyer held that worthy man in a very tight grasp, and the head clerk felt it. He worked him like a slave, and if ever Roger Kemp complained by word or action there was a warning look in his master's face which made him tremble. The worst of serving the mammon of unrighteousness is that we grow to hate it, even though it be our one master, and from fearing John Lingwood the clerk arrived at hating him with all his soul, hating the iron hand that pressed him down and worked and threatened him. And if the lawyer could have seen through a convenient crack into his clerk's heart he would have found a picture of himself there painted in colours of fire.

But in other ways Lingwood's great purpose was prospering. His visits to Rundleham were more frequent than ever, his walks over the marshes with Bertha Noel more prolonged. He had made the girl look up to him and respect him as her guardian, he had wormed his way beyond her respect into the region of her affections, that region that was made so void at the belief in Lawrence's crime which he had instilled. He had acted towards her as the elder brother, and he had gone on from this to something else. The man fascinated her. His strong, apparently open nature, the generosity he displayed in not prosecuting his pupil, all told, just as he meant them to tell, and when, at length, after a longer walk than usual, he put a question to her, she did not turn away.

"I know, dear Bertha," he said, "that I am older than you. But I am not too old to love you or to think that perhaps you can love me in return."

"John," she said, "you are not too old—you are too good to ask me this—me, a pauper."

"It is you I want," he said, "nothing else."

"I wish I had—oh, such a fortune to give you. You should take it all, and then it would never repay you for all you have done."

"But, having no fortune, will you give me yourself?"

"Yes, John!" she replied, placing her hand in his. "You found me here—years ago—you have the best right to me."

"Dearest," he answered, "I think that neither of us will regret that cold Christmas Eve!"

That night Bertha told Margaret. She knelt down beside her as she used to do when she was a child.

"Sissy dear," she said, "I want to tell you something. I'm very, very happy."

"Yes, dear," replied Margaret, with a strange misgiving, "what is it?"

"You asked me to tell you if ever—if—if I gave myself to some one else," whispered the girl.

"Yes?"

"I have, dear—John has asked me to be his wife."

"And you?"

"I have said 'Yes,' Sissy. Oh, he is so good and true!"

"And you love him?"

"Of course I do—very much—that is, I hope so. It isn't the same sort of love quite—I mean I feel such a child by him—but—oh, I can't explain it, Sissy, but I am very happy about it. Aren't you glad, dear?"

"I am always glad to know that you are happy, dear child," replied Margaret.

"Dear Sissy, don't be so cold about it. Haven't you guessed it? You are pleased. Now do say you are!"

"Yes—I had almost guessed it. And I hope you will always be happy, Bertha."

She drew the girl's face towards her and kissed her gently. She had seen this thing coming and it was no great surprise. She had reasoned it out with herself over

and over again. Should she tell Bertha of that broken engagement? Should she warn her against the man who had changed so strangely years ago? And she had said to herself, "No! I bear him no hatred. I know nothing against him. He has always been a true friend to Bertha. Why should I take upon myself to step between them? Surely it would be wrong!"

The old years of her life passed before her mind as she sat there, the girl kneeling by her side, that far-away time when the world had seemed so happy and she the happiest of all. Strange that after nearly twenty years another woman should be loving the same man, and telling her of the happiness it brought! Indeed it was hard to fathom the mystery of life.

"God bless you, dear Bertha," she said presently in her low, sweet voice, "perhaps all has not happened as I could wish. But I want you to be happy. May the bells of Christmas always ring in your home, dear, and bring you both their joy!"

"Ah me!" she said to herself that night, "God has indeed helped me to suffer and be strong. I can bear even this. Poor Lawrence! I shall have to write and tell him. Strange that he and I should be called to suffer the same thing, while they should come to this!"

"Perhaps the person who was most astounded at the news was the Colonel. He was growing more and more feeble as the summer wore on, and when he heard of it he sat in his chair motionless for a time.

"No!" he cried at length, "I will never break my vow, even if such a thing should be true. Why Lingwood has done this I can't guess—unless it be just that pretty face of hers. Pity that Gray turned out a blackguard! But I shall soon be out of it all now. It is nothing to me!"

As for John Lingwood, he seemed very anxious to hasten matters, and prevailed upon Bertha to fix the marriage-day as soon as possible.

"It had better be before the old man dies," he said to himself.

CHAPTER VIII

THERE was joy in the heart of John Lingwood. The weary waiting was nearly over and very soon the game would be his. Every chance had favoured him so far, and now it seemed that nothing could stand in the way of the accomplishment of his schemes. Every enemy had been removed—so he thought. But there was just one upon whom he had not reckoned, and that was the man he most despised—Roger Kemp—the man who was his slave, and who really did most of the work in the office now—at a miserable pittance. And this man, like a worm, conceived the idea of turning. Again, it was chance, but this time a chance against the lawyer.

He was standing in Roger Kemp's office one day, bullying him as usual as he gave him directions, when suddenly a carriage and pair dashed up the street and stopped in front of the door, the horses covered with foam. A young man sprang out of the carriage and rushed into the house, crying out the lawyer's name.

"Good morning, Mr. Lingwood," he exclaimed, as he found himself face to face with the latter. "Quick—there isn't a moment to lose—my father—suddenly ill—dying—he hasn't made his will—he wants you—there's just time. Come at once, back with me."

The excited young man caught the lawyer's arm and half dragged him to the door. Lingwood recognised him as the son of one of his most wealthy clients, who always had a strange prejudice to executing a will. It was a summons that dared not be disobeyed.

"All right," he said, "I'm ready—my hat!—there—you shall tell me about it as we drive—look after things, Kemp—I'll be back as soon as possible. Here—Davis," he added, speaking to the other clerk, "you'd better come too. You may be useful."

Immediately after he had gone, Roger Kemp found occasion to go into the private office for something. As he did so, his eyes glanced casually round the room, till they suddenly fell upon something. He stood rooted to the spot for a moment. Then he darted forward.

One of the drawers of the lawyer's desk was slightly open, and from the keyhole there dangled a bunch of keys!

"What a chance!" muttered the clerk as he swiftly drew them out, looked over them, selected one, the pattern of which he knew well, crossed the room, and inserted it into the keyhole of the great safe.

A moment later and his hand grasped a bulky blue envelope.

"Now we'll see what he keeps locked up here so carefully," he soliloquised.

He read the inscription on the outside of the envelope.

It was this:

"Papers found on the body of a woman discovered on the Rundleham Marshes, December 24, 1882, relating to her child.

"Also, corroborative evidence of the identity of the above child."

"Hullo!" he said, "this is something queer."

He emptied the envelope of its contents and scanned them quickly. There was a certificate of marriage, another of birth, a photograph, some letters, and other papers, and, what astonished him most, some notes in the lawyer's handwriting that threw an unmistakable light on the rest.

"Inserted it into the keyhole of the great safe"

"Whew!" muttered the clerk, "here's a pretty kettle of fish! Who'd have thought of such a thing! And the old gentleman doesn't seem to have known anything. Oh, you're a deep 'un, Mr. Lingwood, you are! To think that you've been keeping this for all these years! Eh? I see your little game. That's why you wanted to get Gray out of the way. That's why you're going to marry the girl, eh? By George, if the Colonel knew of this, I wonder what he'd give to know? All——"

A sudden idea seemed to strike him.

"I'll do it!" he said. "You've held a rod over me—I'll make you feel one—and I doubt if you'd care to make my little affair public after what I've seen. If only there's time!"

Roger Kemp was the quickest shorthand writer in Burchester, and he never worked so fast in his life as he did that morning. Long before John Lingwood returned he had taken down every document in that blue envelope in shorthand, and had pocketed the result, afterwards replacing the papers in the safe, just as he had found them, and the bunch of keys in the drawer. And when the lawyer came back he found his exemplary clerk, bending over his desk, studiously drawing up a mortgage.

John Lingwood hurried to his private office, for he had discovered, after his arrival at his sick client's, that he had left his keys behind him. He gave a sigh of relief as he found them in the place where he had left them. But he opened the safe. Yes—everything was in precise order, thank goodness!

Roger Kemp sat up that night at home into the small hours, filling up, in his neat clerkly hand, many a page of foolscap from his shorthand notes. At length the task was completed and a full copy of every document in that blue envelope lay before him. And the lawyer's purpose was unfolded in those copies.

"And now for next Saturday afternoon," he said triumphantly. "I think I'll astonish the old man and pay off several scores. I

don't care what happens as long as I do that."

"There's a young man from Mr. Lingwood to see you, sir," said the Colonel's butler the following Saturday; "he says it's important business."

"Show him in, Peters."

Roger Kemp entered the study, catlike, as was his wont.

"Well," said the Colonel, "what does Mr. Lingwood want?"

"A great many things, I think, sir. I've come to speak to you in confidence."

"What d'ye mean?" snapped the old man.

"I happen to have obtained some information which may be of interest to you, sir, I thought you might care to—to——"

"What?"

"Well, it is of value."

"I don't understand you."

"Let me come to the point, sir. There is a young lady living in Rundleham named Noel—Miss Bertha Noel. She was found on the marshes years ago."

"Well?"

"That young lady is your grand-daughter, Colonel Carr-Mathers! I can prove it."

He leaned forward and eyed the old man keenly. To his astonishment the latter did not move a muscle, but only snapped out:

"I know that! Well?"

True to himself to the last, the old warrior never betrayed surprise. There was an awkward silence for a minute or two. The clerk was taken aback. Presently he said:

"Mr. Lingwood knows it too, sir."

"Mr. Lingwood is my lawyer," said the Colonel, but this time his voice was a little less steady.

"But he does not think that you are aware of what he knows, and I don't believe you are, either!"

"And what makes you suppose that?"

"These papers!"

"What are they?"

"Copies of the proofs and other things about your grand-daughter that Mr. Lingwood holds in his possession. You may care to have them."

"Ah! you want money, eh? Let me look."

The Colonel read that plain, monotonous writing over from beginning to end, slowly and bravely. Still he never flinched, though he grasped everything.

"I suppose you have been prying into your master's papers?" he said coldly at length.

"Yes—I have."

"And it seems to me that you are both a pair of scoundrels."

"He's one."

"So it appears. It's no use mincing matters between us now. Well, these are only copies. You can take them back. They're no use to me."

"No use to you?"

"No."

"But—but—I allowed you to read them—I——"

"You offered me the information. I never sought it. Good afternoon."

"Stop," said Roger Kemp, pale with baffled rage, "I'll tell you something more about that scoundrel Lingwood, and then perhaps you'll see things in a different light. Because he was determined to marry your grand-daughter he wanted to get Mr. Gray out of the way, and he did, though he knew all the time who was the guilty man."

"And who was that?"

"I am the guilty man—I forged that cheque and did it so that the blame should rest on Mr. Gray, and I'm sorry I did so now. If I'd thought it was going to benefit that beast Lingwood I'd have cut off my right hand first—there!"

The Colonel was now thoroughly roused. He listened while Kemp told him the whole story.

"Will you confess this in writing?" he said; "I'm a magistrate, you know."

"Yes—if you'll give me a chance, if you'll promise——"

"Look here, young man, you deserve nothing, and I've half a mind to give you in charge. But I won't. I want the thing kept private, and it's for Lingwood to prosecute—if he dares! Write out the statement."

He did so. The Colonel read it over. He called in his butler to witness Kemp's signature. Then he unlocked his drawer and took out a little roll of notes.

"I give you this, not because you deserve it, but because the information you bring me is perhaps worth something. And I do it on two conditions: First, that you will absolutely hold your tongue; and secondly, that you leave Burchester on Monday."

"All right," replied Roger Kemp with a grin. "I'm more than likely to do the first, and it would hardly be safe to stay with Mr. Lingwood, I guess."

After he had gone the Colonel thought long and deeply. He read the copies over again. He was keenly alive to the whole of the lawyer's purpose. Only a few things puzzled him, and at length, old soldier as he was, he determined to consult with another over the plan of campaign before he took any definite steps. For this purpose he wrote a note to Margaret Kingslake, asking her to come and see him at once, for the Colonel was always quick in action.

She saw there was something the matter directly she entered the room.

"Sit down, Miss Kingslake," he said, "I am going to talk to you in great confidence. You will respect that confidence?"

"Of course."

"You will say nothing of what I am going to tell you to any one—not even to—to—Miss Noel?"

"Certainly not," she replied, wondering what Bertha had to do with it.

"I am going to tell you an old story—something that happened many years ago now. I daresay you have heard rumours of it. It is about my—my son."

"I knew you once had a son, Colonel," she answered gently, "and that there was a trouble. And I have always been sorry for you."

He bowed stiffly, and went on.

"My son was all that I had in the world, and I had hoped he would have followed my profession honourably. But he disobeyed me. Do you know why?"

"Was it not by his marriage?"

"It was. He fell in love with a pretty face. She was a barmaid, or something of the kind. I warned him that if he married her I would disown him for ever. He married her, and I kept my word. I have never broken it yet. He was obliged to leave the army—he could not live on his pay. Finally he went abroad and died—in great poverty. I heard of his death. It did not affect me. He had passed out of my life."

He paused a moment. The story was painful in the telling.

"He left the wretched woman behind him, and a child. I knew of this at the time, but it did not interest me. I only feared she might one day come here—begging. Well, she did come—but I never saw her."

"You turned her away?" asked Margaret with a ring of indignation in her voice.

"I did not turn her away. The opportunity was not given me. A sterner hand than mine met her on the way and stopped her—almost within reach of the house."

"I do not understand you."

"You will in a moment. My son's wife came here the day before Christmas Eve, 1882. She lost her way on the marshes, and her body was found the following morning. Now do you understand?"

Margaret sat in her chair speechless for a minute. Then the whole truth stood revealed before her.

"And Bertha was her child—your grandchild!" she gasped.

"Exactly."

"And you have known this, and——"

"Stop, Miss Kingslake. I have known nothing definite till this afternoon. I may have had my suspicions, but they did not come till years later. The first was the strange likeness which the little girl at the Vicarage bore to my son; the second only came last Christmas, when I accidentally ascertained that old Ward had found, near the spot where the body was discovered, a silver match-box that I once gave my son."

"But how—how have you arrived at all this? Nothing was found on the poor creature to give a clue to her identity."

"Nothing was produced at the inquest, you mean, but something was found. She carried the proofs on her. Her marriage certificate. The certificate of the child's birth, some letters and other papers."

"But what became of them? Surely Ward would never——"

"Miss Kingslake," interrupted the Colonel, "who was it who found the body before Ward saw it at all?"

There was a pause. The Colonel leaned forward to catch the answer. It came presently—almost in a whisper:

"John Lingwood!"

"Yes. Stop! Let me tell you all before you say anything. Miss Kingslake, I am sorry for you, for I know how much you have suffered. He made you break off the engagement; I guessed it at the time,

though I have never known what his reason was till to-day. Listen. He must have taken these papers off the body and kept them to himself for a purpose."

"And that?"

"To-day he is engaged to be married to Bertha—to my grand-daughter. And she is my next of kin—the only relative I have. Wait! Read these copies for yourself."

She read them. Then she said very quietly:

"Thank you for telling me this, Colonel. It is all plain to me now. But it is harder to bear."

"And now read this!" he went on, handing her Roger Kemp's confession.

She did so. It was with almost a sob that she answered:

"I did not think he would have stooped so low. But, thank God, Lawrence is innocent."

The Colonel laid his hand on hers.

"The man who stooped low enough to relinquish you," he said gently, "could not go much lower. I have always despised him for it, though I didn't understand. Forgive me for telling you all this."

"It was right for me to know it—and now, what is best to be done?"

"I sent for you to ask you that. Before we decide anything I am puzzled over one point."

"And that?"

"Years ago I made my will—leaving everything I possess to charities."

"I think I understand," she replied. "And where is that will?"

"In Lingwood's custody."

Her woman's intuition grasped the riddle at once.

"The man who would do that"—and she pointed scornfully to the bundle of papers on the table—"would not hesitate to destroy a will. That is a small matter!"

"You are right," said the Colonel. "I never thought of that. Of course he would have destroyed it as soon as I was dead."

"And now," said Margaret, "the first thing you have to do is to acknowledge your grand-daughter."

The Colonel paused before he replied.

"No!" he said.

"What? You will do her this injustice? You will——"

"Miss Kingslake, I swore never to speak to my son or his wife and child, never to have anything to do with them."

"It was a wicked oath."

"Perhaps."

"Oh, surely you will—you, who, pardon my saying so, are nearing that land where it is not safe to go unless we forgive—Colonel Carr-Mathers, listen to reason. Besides, she must be told. This engagement must be broken off. She must hear the bitter truth about John Lingwood. She must know that Lawrence is innocent. She loved Lawrence. I am sure she did. And now; surely it is not too late for all to come right?"

There was silence for a few moments. He was evidently thinking deeply, and there was a struggle within him. Presently he said:

"Whatever I make up my mind to do, you have a right to say what you think should be done. Not only have you been made to suffer, but you have acted as a mother to—to—my grand-daughter. Besides, I have a respect for your opinion. Tell me now, you are anxious that Lawrence Gray should marry her? I know you are."

"I have always wished for it."

"I like the lad. I always have liked him. And I'm sorry I ever believed ill of him. Now, Miss Kingslake, this is a difficult matter to arrange."

"Would it not be best to do as I suggested, to tell Bertha—that is, Alice, for I suppose we ought to call her so now that we know her name—everything, and to tell Mr. Lingwood everything too?"

"Not yet. At all events, wait for a few days. There is the question of the will."

"What do you mean?"

"I must have everything ready to frustrate Lingwood before he knows I have discovered his secret. There is no knowing what he might do if he were on his guard. Now, if this match is to come off, Rundleham Court must be theirs. Do you follow me?"

"I will not call you generous, because she will have a right to it."

"That is a matter of opinion," said the Colonel grimly, "but, at all events—if only for young Gray's sake—I wish it to be so."

"Then all you have to do is to make a will in her favour."

"Your usual judgment has deserted you Miss Kingslake. If I do that there are two possibilities against us. First, this man Lingwood has evidently got a hold over the

girl. Who knows but that she may believe him? He might concoct some very plausible story and make her marry him after all—and then he'd get what he was aiming at—the property. But I want him to stand before her in his true colours."

"And the other possibility?"

"Young Gray himself."

"I don't understand."

"Is it fair to him, as a poor man, to make her an heiress?"

"Ah! I see what you mean," said Margaret. "You are quite right."

"But, on the other hand, if I left all to him——"

"She would never marry him. Her pride would be too great."

"Exactly. Now you see the difficulty?"

"But why make it a question of a will at all?"

"I cannot let things stand as they are. And if this marriage is to take place at all, I feel it will be after my death. I have not long to live."

Margaret thought for a moment.

"I believe, after all," she said, raising her eyes and looking at the old man, "that it would be best to tell her all at once—and—and you might have her in the house to be with you. John Lingwood could do nothing then."

He winced.

"No," he said stubbornly, "not yet."

There was a long pause. Presently the Colonel said:

"I think I know what to do, but I shall not tell you. Only, remember," and he held up a trembling forefinger, "what my wishes are!"

"I will."

"I know that I can depend on you to see them carried out. And—as soon as I have done what I intend to do—I will see the girl and she shall know that she is my son's child. She shall also know, and so shall Lingwood, that I have disinherited her."

"Colonel!"

"It is the only way. You will see that I am right. Meanwhile promise me that you will say nothing to her till I give you permission. Promise!"

"Very well, I promise."

"And write to Gray. Tell him to come back. I will buy him out if it can be arranged. Tell him I beg his pardon for believing Lingwood."

"I will do so."

The next evening the Colonel astonished his butler by ordering the carriage to be ready at an early hour in the morning. And, despite the remonstrances of that worthy individual, his master insisted upon driving in to Burchester. Moreover, he went to the station. Also he took a first-class return ticket to London, giving directions that the carriage was to meet the afternoon down train.

He was very shaky when he got back that evening. But there was a triumphant look in his face. It had been a terrible strain to him, and he was trembling violently when he retired for the night. A couple of days afterwards he was taken seriously ill, and a messenger galloped into Burchester for the doctor.

The latter looked very grave when he came out of the Colonel's room.

"Has he any relatives?" he asked the housekeeper; "because, if so, they should be sent for without delay."

"There is no one that I know of, sir. Is he in danger?"

"In grave danger. I told him some time ago that any excitement might be fatal. And he seems to have exerted himself too much. Why did you let him go to London the other day? It was madness."

"Lor', sir, if he had a mind to do anything no mortal power would stop him."

"Ah—there is a power that will stop him very soon."

"You mean, sir——?"

"I can do nothing more. It may be two or three days. Certainly no longer."

The doctor knew that Lingwood was the Colonel's lawyer, and when he returned to Burchester he told him.

John Lingwood rode off to Rundleham at once. But he did not go straight to the Court. He wanted to see Bertha first. Things were taking a turn he had not anticipated, for he had hoped the marriage would have been over before the Colonel's death. He was strangely affectionate. Bertha noticed it.

"Dearest," he said, "I want you to promise something. Suppose you were to become very rich. Would you give me up?"

"O John," she replied, "you know I

would not. I only wish such a thing could happen—for your sake. What makes you ask such a question?"

"Nothing, darling. It was a thought. That was all. I couldn't bear to lose you—you are my very life now."

"And you are not going to lose me, you dear, stupid John, whatever happens."

Then he called at the Court He was told the Colonel was too ill to see him. As he came down the drive he met Margaret going to the house and saluted her coldly. He hardly noticed the incident.

The Colonel had sent for her, giving strict orders that he wished to see her alone. When she entered the room she was horrified to see the white, pain-worn face on the pillow, and to hear the heavy breathing. The nurse went out.

"Miss Kingslake," he whispered, "it is kind of you to come. . . . I—I—have arranged everything . . . I pray God . . . It will all come right."

"Shall I bring her to see you?" she asked gently.

"No—not yet—presently—I meant to have sent for her too—and—and—I was too proud—at the last. God forgive me! You—you—may bring her—if you like But first—I want you to promise something."

"What is it, my dear old friend? I will do all you ask."

"This address—" and he drew a directed envelope from his pillow—"when I am gone—write to them at once—they know what to do."

"Yes—yes," she said, glancing at the envelope. It was addressed to a London firm of solicitors: Messrs. Foster & Co.

"And—you remember—I want her—and Gray—to have everything. You must solve the riddle."

"I?"

"You will know soon—yes—you may bring her now."

She turned to go from the room when suddenly he called her back. There was a peculiar smile on his face.

"Margaret," he said, calling her for the only time by that name, "if—if—it is too late when you come back—don't tell her."

"Don't tell her?"

"No—I have a reason—if she comes first I would like—like—to tell her myself—if not—no, no! Promise me!—And wait till afterwards—not—a—word—of—anything—you will see why."

Perplexed and anxious she hurried back to the Cottage.

"Bertha," she cried, "come with me at once; Colonel Carr-Mathers is dying, and he wants to see you."

"Wants to see me?"

"Yes—yes. Come, or it will be too late."

She half dragged the girl through the village and up to the Court. The butler, grave and sombre as usual, opened the door.

"The Colonel has just passed away, miss!" he said.

CHAPTER IX

JOHN LINGWOOD heard of the Colonel's death that same evening. In all the anxiety of the past two or three days he had almost forgotten the worry occasioned by the non-appearance of Roger Kemp at his customary place; in fact, he had put it down to some betting trouble on the part of the clerk causing him to beat a hasty retreat from the town. Now, at length, the long waiting had come to an end and all seemed to be within his grasp. He had only one regret—the thought that if the marriage had taken place before the Colonel's death the whole thing would have been absolutely clenched. It was but a passing qualm, however, for he felt very sure of his influence over Bertha and that he was complete master of the situation.

Once more he paid a visit to that dingy room that had kept his secret, as he thought, so well for eighteen long years. The cuckoo clock struck the hour as he put his key into the safe, and the little bird came out with a creaking groan and wheezed more hoarsely than ever as it tried to emphasise the fleeting time. It did not suit his triumphant mood. He wanted, not a mouldy old cuckoo, but a cock that should crow blatantly.

"Cuck—grrr—coo! gr-r-r-r—Cuck—gr-r-r—coo!—gr-r-r-r!"

"Ah, groan away!" he muttered, "I'm nearly done with you. Groan over the weary past and die in it. I live for the future."

Once more he looked through the precious papers, those scraps of information which

were to bring, nay, which had brought him fortune. Strange irony it is that all the tinsel-gilt arrays of fortune mostly depend upon flimsy paper—time-worn parchment—faded ink, things that the flame of a candle can destroy in a few seconds, and the candle itself the emblem of the human life that enjoys the tinsel-gilt, and then flickers, smokes and droops!

With a smile upon his lips he replaced the papers, and then opened the big Carr-Mathers deed-box. Roll after roll, parchment after parchment he drew forth and spread on the table in front of him in a glow of satisfaction. There they were—leases and securities—lands and tenements—stocks and shares—agreements and certificates, once again all those mere paper things with signatures and seals that spell out that magic word, "Wealth." And he the executor for them all! And he about to marry the fair possessor thereof!

Wait a moment! Just a scrap of paper in the way of it all, tied round with a bit of red tape and endorsed:

THE LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT
OF
EDWARD CARR-MATHERS, COLONEL.

It was such irony—drawn up with so much care, worth so much—and yet worth nothing! Not even the paper it was written on. He had been obliged to keep it till now in case the Colonel might ever have expressed a wish to see it.

He grinned maliciously as he struck a match and lit the candle on the table. Then he held the Will in the flame till it began to burn.

"There they go!" he ejaculated, "all the old man's thousands. Wouldn't the boards and committees of that list of charities fret and fume if they knew what was in this little bonfire? Charity, indeed! It was doing the orphan out of her rights. What is more to the purpose, it was doing me out of my rights, for which I've waited so long. Poof!"

He was too wily to throw the embers in the grate. He rubbed the ashes between his hands till only a black powder remained, and this he scattered out of the window. So the night breeze blew away Colonel Carr-Mathers' will for ever, and John Lingwood's mind was at rest.

The lawyer had a great deal to do that week. It was he who made all arrangements for the funeral. He was in and out of Rundleham Court, ordering the servants about, interviewing tenants and tradesmen, and generally conducting the business of the estate for those few days. To all questions as to how the Colonel had left his money he either maintained a strict silence, or merely said that everything would become known directly the funeral was over, from which it was generally concluded that the lawyer was in possession of the will, and that there would be a great and solemn reading thereof in due course.

Indeed he hinted at such an event very strongly. He made a point of calling on the principal tenants and telling them that he hoped they would not only attend the funeral but would repair to Rundleham Court directly afterwards, as there was important business to be transacted there. With this view, also, he went to see Margaret and Bertha.

"I suppose you will go to the funeral?" he asked.

"Of course," replied Margaret, "we have known the Colonel for so many years. And he has been so good to me." It was an effort to bring herself to speak to him. Only her promise to the Colonel sustained her.

"I wonder," said Bertha (for so we must still call her) "what he wanted to see me for."

"Wanted to see you?" asked Lingwood.

"Yes. He sent for me just before he died, you know, but I was too late to see him."

"Indeed!" said the lawyer thoughtfully as a suspicion crossed his mind, just a momentary twinge of curiosity. "Well, perhaps you will know later on," he added with a quiet smile.

"There can't be anything wrong," he said to himself; "and even if the old man suspected at the last it wouldn't alter matters. On the contrary, it rather helps me. At any rate, she knows nothing."

"And who has he left all his money to, John?" asked the girl.

"Ah!" replied Lingwood, "you mustn't ask me to disclose professional secrets till the right time. But you shall know as soon as any one. That reminds me. I want you both to come to Rundleham Court immediately after the funeral."

"To hear the reading of the will?" asked

Bertha with an eye-sparkle of true feminine curiosity.

"Something of that sort, dear. I particularly want you both to be present."

"Is it really necessary for me to be there?" asked Margaret coldly.

"Yes. I should prefer it."

He meant to spare her nothing of his triumph, and she felt it.

"I suppose I shall have to leave the Cottage now?" she went on.

"Possibly some arrangement can be made," he answered. "You have been living here rent free, I believe?"

She ignored the sarcasm.

"I have been partaking of the Colonel's kindness," she said quietly, "but, of course, I know that is at an end now."

"O Sissy," said Bertha, "I'm sure John will be able to arrange something. Won't you, dear?"

"Yes. That will be all right, I fancy," he replied with a laugh.

When John Lingwood said good-bye to Bertha at the gate a few minutes later he remarked: "Darling, there may be a little surprise in store for you within the next few days. You know me well enough now to be sure I am not bragging when I tell you that whatever happens you will owe it in a great measure to myself. Perhaps I have worked in your interests, dear child, more than you know. But if I can see you happy I have my reward—even if you should give me up!"

"O John," she said, taking his hand in hers, "I don't understand what you mean. But you know I am yours always—whatever happens!"

Meanwhile Margaret had posted the letter which the Colonel had asked her to write, communicating the news of his death to the London solicitors. A couple of days before the funeral a quiet little old man, with sharp-looking grey eyes and side whiskers, called at the Cottage.

"Miss Kingslake?" he said as he was ushered into her presence.

She bowed.

"I am Mr. Foster. I had little idea that, when Colonel Carr-Mathers called on us the other day, this sad event would bring me here so soon. I believe you are acquainted with all the circumstances of this peculiar case, so it will not be necessary to go into them now. Suffice it to say that the late Colonel adopted a plan which I think will entirely frustrate the very deep designs that have been laid by Mr. Lingwood."

"I am very glad to hear it, and I only hope that all will come right."

"I am sure it will. Only we had better not move in the matter till the funeral has taken place. I thought I would come early, so as to be on the spot in case anything unforeseen should happen. I shall stay at the Crown, but please do not mention to any one who I am. I want to spring the mine unexpectedly, and it will be best if I remain unknown for the present. I hear that Mr. Lingwood wishes for a gathering of tenants and others at the hall after the funeral."

"He has begged me to come."

"Ah! And, of course, you will be there. Well, we will let him talk first, and then stop him."

"It will be terrible for him, I fear," said Margaret with a sigh.

"And he richly deserves it," replied the old solicitor.

The funeral took place in due course. They brought the old Squire into the church for the last time and the diamond hatchments glared blankly down upon the coffin as it stood in the aisle. Nearly all the village was there. It was true that the Colonel had never been a favourite. Kind words were rare upon his lips, and kind deeds rarer still upon his hands. But, still, he was the Squire—the Lord of the Manor—and so they came forth to do him homage. There were the tenants of the estate, the servants at the Court—even a sprinkling of fishermen, old Harry Ward among them with a crape band round his best bowler-hat. And in a corner of the church stood that quiet stranger from London, narrowly watching the face of John Lingwood in the hour of his triumph.

So they laid the Colonel to rest in the little graveyard. There was one genuine mourner there at least. The tears were starting in Margaret Kingslake's eyes as she listened to the last solemn words of the Burial Service. She had seen behind the grim mask which had hidden the old warrior from the world for so many years, and she felt she had lost a friend indeed. But then Margaret's was one of those sweet natures which always find friends—and there were many of them lying beneath that soft green turf.

A little procession wound their way back to Rundleham Court through the village, whispering speculations. Farmer Brown's lease was just running out, and he wondered much if he were going to be allowed to renew it, for, despite his continual grumbling, the farm had its value. Farmer Joyce's lease had several years to run, but the question was, would the new owner, whoever he might turn out to be, build him that barn he wanted so much? And the servants; they were pondering over sundry legacies. Peters, the butler, carried his head high and hopefully, with the proud consciousness of fourteen years service, and sniffed at the pretensions of the cook, who declared that "the master had always spoken good of her vittles." And so they forgot the poor lifeless clay in the thoughts of what that clay had left behind it.

They gathered in the old hall, on the tip-top of expectation. John Lingwood took his seat at the little table that had been prepared for him and gave a sweeping glance round. His eye lit upon an unobtrusive-looking old man seated at the back. At first he had half a mind to ask him his business there, but then he reflected that he might be some out-of-the-way creditor, and that in any case his presence, even if a stranger, mattered nothing.

A dead silence fell upon the little assembly as the lawyer undid a packet of papers and began. He spoke in a low, subdued voice at first, but grew a little excited as he went on.

"I have a very grave and serious duty to perform," he began, "as legal adviser to my lamented client. It is a duty which will call for some little explanation, and when that has been given I must retire, for you will see that I shall no longer be able to act as his representative."

He paused a moment, and then went on.

"It was the Colonel's desire that I should disclose what I am about to say to you all after his funeral. Although it was my earnest wish that he should reveal everything in his lifetime, he was always adverse to it, and for many years my lips have been unwillingly forced to keep a secret which I have always urged him to make public."

There was breathless excitement among the listeners. What was coming out of this?

"Let me enter into a few particulars Colonel Carr-Mathers lost his wife, as you all probably know, at the birth of her first child. He idolised his son, but there came a day when this son disgraced him. He insisted upon contracting a marriage towards which his father was bitterly antagonistic. The latter warned him that if he persisted he would disown him and never see him again. You know that the Colonel's word was always irrevocable, and in this case he kept it to the letter, notwithstanding that his son was the only relation he had in the world. Well, the son died abroad, leaving a widow and one child—a girl. Eighteen years ago the widow determined to seek out her father-in-law and to throw herself upon his charity, for she was reduced to the direst straits. She started to come here, but she lost her way on the marshes and died there. The child was saved. I found them both."

"Oh!"

Bertha gave a spasmodic gasp and clutched Margaret's hand. All eyes were turned on her.

"On the mother I discovered certain papers which told me at once who she was."

"Why weren't they produced at th' hinquest?" shouted old Farmer Brown, who had served on the occasion and who could no longer restrain himself.

"I was about to explain," replied the lawyer coldly. "Recognising the secret which I had discovered, I felt it my duty to show them to the Colonel first. I did so at the earliest opportunity. He read them through and fell into a towering passion, swearing that it should never be made public. I remonstrated with him strongly. He ended by refusing to give up the papers. He locked them up in his desk before my face and forbade me to say a word about them. I argued with him, I implored him for the sake of the child to be at least reasonable if not merciful, but he would not hear me. Then I told him I should state the facts of the case at the inquest. He waited a minute, and then said—I recollect every word of it—'Look here, Lingwood, if you dare say a word of this, I swear I will disown the child and say that you trumped up the whole story. My word will carry more weight than yours, and I hold all the clues, and—on the slightest disclosure from you I'll burn the lot of them.'"

"I may have been wrong. God knows I did it for the best, and I had many a qualm of conscience over it. But I argued that the only chance of getting right done was to keep silent. I thought that, perhaps, he might relent and do his grand-daughter justice. So I said nothing. I don't excuse myself. It was a terrible position. But remember, if I had spoken I knew the child would lose her chance for ever."

There was a hushed murmur of excitement in the room as the lawyer paused for a moment. Bertha was still grasping Margaret's hand. The latter's face was very white, her lips were compressed, and she was gazing at John Lingwood with sad eyes, for she was hearing the story of her own betrayal from his lying lips.

"A few weeks afterwards," he went on, "the Colonel made his will, leaving the whole of his property to charities with myself as executor. In vain I urged him to do justice to his grand-daughter, who had been adopted by Mr. Kingslake. All the answer I could get was, 'If you say a single word about this affair, that will stands. I may alter it. That remains to be seen.'"

"And did he alter it, sir?" asked Farmer Brown again.

"I am coming to that. Over and over again when opportunity offered I begged him to change his mind. He remained obdurate. For some years past I have never mentioned the subject to him. Finally, I quite gave up all hope. This led me to take a certain step which I should have hesitated in doing had I known what was about to take place." And he looked gently at Bertha, who was sitting just in front of the table.

"I understand, John," she said softly. "Go on!"

"Then the unforeseen happened. A week or two before his death he sent for me. He knew he could not live long, the doctor had told him so. To my astonishment he had relented. He placed the papers in my hands and told me to destroy his will. I did so in his presence. I urged him to make another so as to clinch the matter. 'No,' he said, 'the identity will be established beyond all question. There is no need.' Then I begged of him to make himself known to his grand-daughter before it was too late. This he absolutely refused to do."

"Not quite," said Bertha in a low voice. "I understand now why he sent for me."

"Yes. He sent for you at the last moment. But he had died before you reached the house."

Then he added, in a louder tone:

"Therefore the whole of the estate of the late Colonel Carr-Mathers belongs without reserve to his sole heiress and next of kin, Alice Carr-Mathers. I will read you the contents of these papers, and then all that is necessary will be to legally establish the identity."

Amid a subdued hum of excitement he briefly went through that precious packet of papers which had been in his possession for so long. The servants forgot their vanished legacies in the astounding news they had heard. John Lingwood had played his part dramatically, just as he had intended. He wanted, for obvious reasons, the world to hear the story from his own lips first. That is why he arranged this semi-public disclosure.

"And now," he said in conclusion, "there is no further business. I might just say——"

"Stop!"

A sharp voice sounded from the back of the room. The little old gentleman was standing on his legs.

"What is it?"

"There is a great deal more business to be gone into, Mr. Lingwood."

"Who are you, sir? If you have any claim against the estate it will be seen to at the proper time. We cannot deal with creditors now."

"My name is Foster, of the firm of Foster & Co., Lincoln's Inn Fields, and I am here as the solicitor representing the late Colonel Carr-Mathers."

A hushed silence fell upon the little company. Lingwood started to his feet as if a thunderbolt had fallen.

"What right have you——?" he began.

"Every right, sir," interrupted the other, advancing to the table. "In the first place, I hold in my hand copies of all those documents you have just produced."

"Copies of these documents?" ejaculated John Lingwood, thrown off his guard by the sudden revelation. "Where did you get them from? Let me look at them?"

"They were given me by the Colonel himself. Was it a strange thing that he

should be able to make copies of papers which you have just said were in his possession for nearly eighteen years?"

"I don't understand," gasped the lawyer.

"You very soon will. In the second place, I have here the Colonel's last will and testament, executed at our office a few days before his death, and which I am about to read."

"What nonsense is this?" cried Lingwood. "What preposterous story are you bringing forward?"

"No story so preposterous as yours, sir," said the other in sharp, decisive tones. "I am going to state the truth, and confute the abominable concoction of lies you have just told us."

Alice Carr-Mathers rose, trembling, from her chair.

"I beg that you will be silent," she said; "I cannot hear such things said. All this has been a great shock to me, but I have a right to ask that, if there is any more business, it should be done in private."

"Pardon me, Miss Carr-Mathers, but you have no such right. You are not the Colonel's heiress, and you have no word in this matter."

"Not his heiress!" shrieked Lingwood.

"No! Silence, sir! You have had your turn, and now it is mine. You wonder how it happens that I have copies of papers which have been in your possession all these years, and of which the Colonel knew nothing? Mr. Lingwood," he went on, turning to the little group, "has brought this upon his own head. He found the documents upon the woman, certainly, but he never said a word to the Colonel about them. On the contrary, he kept them for his own purpose. The Colonel knew nothing till a few days before his death—these copies came into his hands accidentally."

"How?" snarled Lingwood. But the other took no notice.

"Also the Colonel never ordered Mr. Lingwood to destroy his will. No doubt he has destroyed it. That was part of his plan."

"What plan?" gasped the unhappy lawyer.

"Your plan was to marry the heiress of Colonel Carr-Mathers," replied the old solicitor bluntly, "and a very deeply laid plot it was."

"Stop!" cried Alice Carr-Mathers. "I will not have such things said."

"I am sorry, but it is necessary, and only fair to all concerned."

And, piece by piece, he told the wondering audience the story. John Lingwood sat in his chair, pale and rigid, making no comment. He was at bay at last. Once he looked towards Margaret, but the next moment he had cast down his eyes before that calmly scornful gaze of hers. When Mr. Foster had finished, he said in a low tone:

"And this will—what is it?"

"By the terms of this will," said the other, unfolding the document, "Colonel Carr-Mathers has bequeathed the whole of his property without reserve to Margaret Kingslake, only surviving daughter of the Reverend William Kingslake, late Vicar of Rundleham!"

It was Margaret's turn to be astonished now.

"To me!" she cried.

"Yes—absolutely."

The room swam before her for an instant, then a great light broke upon her. At last she understood the riddle. She was about to speak, but hesitated. She saw it was a policy of silence. At length she said quietly:

"Very well. The Colonel knew best."

John Lingwood started to his feet with an oath, the picture of a baffled man. She gazed at him steadily, she alone knowing what was passing in his distracted mind. Alice Carr-Mathers sat, her head buried in her hands, sobbing bitterly. There, before him, were the two women who in their turn had been the guiding stars of the destiny he had carved out for himself: the one that noble, large-hearted woman who had loved him with all the strength of her pure nature and whom he had rejected at the first whisper of a great temptation; the other the girl whose love he had snatched out of that furnace of slander of his own kindling for the sake of her wealth. And now, after all the years of waiting and scheming, the woman whom he had sacrificed stood before him—the heiress of Rundleham Court! It was a masterpiece of bitterest irony that the Colonel's brain had planned. It was a mighty retribution, hurled back on the man at the very moment when his triumph had seemed supreme.

The silence was broken by Farmer Brown.

"'O John—tell me this is not true!'"

"You be a liar and a scoundrel, Mister Lingwood!" he cried emphatically.

"Wait a minute," went on Mr. Foster, "there is something yet to come," and he drew another paper out of his pocket. "Mr. Lingwood has another charge to answer for."

"No, not yet!"

It was Margaret who spoke, generous to the last. She knew what was coming.

"I am in command now," she said with dignity, "and what follows must be in private. Please leave the room, all of you—except you, Mr. Lingwood. Have a little more courage, dear," she whispered to the girl by her side, "there is one more trial for you, and then it will be over."

There was no refusing her request. One by one the tenants and servants bowed respectfully to her and went out silently, to discuss this great revelation at their leisure. The four of them were left in the room. John Lingwood still stood, pale and haggard, at the table. For a moment there was silence. Then Alice Carr-Mathers lifted her tear-stained face and said:

"O John—tell me this is not true! Tell me it is all a mistake."

He answered not a word. She went up to him and laid her hand on his arm.

"John?"

Then he turned to her savagely. He was too beaten to care what he said. He was half mad.

"Curse you!" he cried, "you miserable pauper. Yes, it is true, and I've only got you to thank for it."

And he flung her hand away from him. She gave a half sob. Margaret's arms were round her in a moment.

"Courage, darling!" she whispered again. "Go on, Mr. Foster, please."

"John Lingwood," said the old man, "I have here a confession, signed by your clerk Roger Kemp, and declared by him in the presence of the late Colonel. Shall I read it?"

The miserable man made no answer, so he read those terrible lines that established the villainy of master and man and the innocence of Lawrence Gray. This was the crowning act. Alice swooned in Margaret's arms when she heard the truth. The latter carried her out of the room as though she had been a child, first saying to Mr. Foster:

"I will leave you to deal with this. Please avoid all unnecessary publicity."

He bowed.

"Mr. Lingwood," he said stiffly, when the two men were alone, "I think you must see that your case has fallen. We had better come to terms."

"What do you want?"

"First of all the delivery of all papers and deeds connected with the estate. Secondly, you must write a letter to the local press entirely exonerating Lawrence Gray from the suspicions which have been cast upon him. You need enter into no details. Miss Kingslake will spare you that. This is all that is necessary. Do you agree?"

"Yes," snarled Lingwood, "and if ever I catch Kemp I'll murder him."

The other could not repress a parting sally:

"In that case you would bring your own career to a fitting close, Mr. Lingwood. Good afternoon. Thank you, I'll keep these originals."

So John Lingwood turned on his heel and strode out. As he went through the door he found himself face to face for a moment with Margaret, and his eyes met hers. Perhaps that quiet, steadfast rebuke haunted the lawyer afterwards more than all the remorse for all else that he had lost, for he had lost his greatest treasure in Margaret herself. He went back to Burchester, entered his dingy office, and threw himself into the chair in which he had schemed so often. He sat there in silence. And then the rusty, whirring old clock began to strike and the cuckoo came forth and groaned and chuckled. John Lingwood started to his feet, seized the ruler off the desk, and struck savagely at it. There was a crash and a whir, a splatter of dust, a breaking of wheels, as the clock flew to pieces, a fit symbol of the lawyer's own machinery and plans. A week later, and Burchester knew him no more. It had grown too hot for him.

Margaret and Alice sat in the little parlour of the Cottage that night of the funeral. The girl's face was pale with suffering, and her eyes red with tears. Margaret had been trying to comfort her.

"Dear child," she said, "it has been an awful blow for you, and I would it could have been spared you. But it had to fall—and now—it will be all for the best."

"O Sissy—you can't know how terrible it all is. Why should it all have come upon me like this?"

"Dearest, there are many things we cannot explain. But I do know how hard it is. And now I want to tell you something, and perhaps you will see that it has not all fallen upon you. Years ago, when you were brought in from the marshes—a tiny little child—the man who found you was engaged to be married. Did you ever know that?"

"No. Who—who was she?"

"He was engaged to me, dear child. And I loved him very, very much. More than I think you have ever done, for your love for him has been different."

"Sissy! And you never told me!"

"No. But I will now," and she laid bare that sad story of her life—simply and quietly.

"Oh, dearest, dearest Sissy, and he gave up you for me?"

"He made me give him up, my child. And I did not think then that I should live to thank God for it."

"Sissy," whispered the girl, as she crept close to Margaret, "I am very, very glad that you are my grandfather's heiress. You deserve every bit of his property. I couldn't have touched it. Oh, I am so glad, and

—and—you'll let me live with you, won't you?"

Margaret smiled quietly to herself.

"If you want to live with me," she replied; "but we won't talk about that just now. There is something else I want to say to you. Do you know that I have written to Lawrence?"

"Oh, don't; please don't! I—I treated him shamefully."

"You poor child! I knew he never would have done such a thing."

"I ought to have believed him. Sissy, Sissy, I am so miserable."

"Let me ask you something. Did you love John Lingwood very much?"

The girl blushed and hung her head.

"He—he made me love him," she said. "I see it all now. I was angry and mistrustful, and—and I thought John was generous and wise, and—and— Oh, you know I cared for Lawrence, dear!"

"And do you love him still?"

She whispered in Margaret's ear:

"Yes. I have learned my lesson. Yes, Sissy. But I couldn't ever look him in the face again."

"Ah well, we'll see!" replied Margaret.

"I—I wonder where he is, and whether he's safe," murmured the girl. There was a paper lying on the table unopened. They had not thought of reading the news that day. Margaret took it up and looked at it. Presently she gave a little start.

"What is it, Sissy?"

"Nothing, dear; don't worry."

"But I know there's something. Don't hide it from me, please. I must know."

Margaret silently handed her the paper. There was a paragraph describing a skirmish, and underneath was the heading:

"British Casualties."

And, a few lines beneath:

"Imperial Yeomanry. Trooper L. Gray. Severely wounded."

The poor girl laid her head on the table and sobbed as if her heart would break.

"Oh! it is my fault, it is my fault!" she cried.

"Dear child, you must not meet troubles half-way like this. We must pray that all will be well with him. To-morrow we will telegraph, and—perhaps he may be invalided home when he gets better."

CHAPTER X

Some two or three months had passed since the famous scene at Rundleham Court. The Colonel's will had been duly proved, and Margaret Kingslake was lawfully established as owner of the estate. She still lived on in the Cottage, and seemed in no hurry to take possession. There were many things to be done first, she said in answer to all inquiries as to when she would take up her abode at the Court. The question of repairs and renovations had to be gone into. Concerning this matter she consulted Alice Carr-Mathers very often, and by degrees the girl took quite an interest in the old house which had so narrowly escaped being hers. As for the Vicar's wife, her demeanour towards Margaret was very different now, and the latter was much amused at her frequent visits and invitations. She had already hinted pretty broadly that the Vicar wanted to do many things in the parish concerning which subscriptions would be acceptable.

"But she's never offered to give a penny to anything," said the inestimable lady to a bosom friend. "I call it downright mean of her, with all her money. But we shall persevere; oh yes, we shall persevere, for the sake of the parish."

But there was another matter besides the repairs at the Court that was filling the mind of Alice Carr-Mathers. Lawrence's wound had not proved so serious as was first anticipated, but it was bad enough to put an end to his fighting in South Africa. And so, after a weary time spent in a field-hospital, the news came that he was about to be invalided home. It was with mixed feelings that the girl looked forward to his return, for she had suffered many heart-burnings since that night when she had read the news of his wound in the paper. Indeed, the whole thing had been a sore trial to her, and the publicity of much of it was grievous. Margaret wished often that she could have been spared that, but the girl herself acknowledged that it had been for the best, and that no punishment was too hard for her in return for the way in which she had acted.

As for the village, it was perfectly delighted. Wherever Margaret went she was greeted with heartfelt congratulations. But

she only smiled in reply and took all the greetings very quietly.

"When be you a-goin' to live up at the Court, miss?" asked old Harry Ward bluntly one day as he sat baiting his hooks on the shore.

"I don't know," she replied. "I don't think the house will be ready this side of Christmas. But there's something else to think of just now. We're expecting an old friend of yours very soon."

"Who be that, miss?"

"You haven't forgotten Mr. Gray, have you, Ward?"

"Lord bless ye, no, miss! And so he be a-coming home! Ah, I was most as pleased to hear he was cleared o' that 'ere forgery business as to know the Colonel had left you all his money. I never b'lieved he did it."

"I know you didn't."

"And won't Miss Bertha—leastwise Miss Alice—be pleased to see him?"

"I think she will."

"Many's the time as I've took 'em both out to sea, Tom and me, and I've allus said as how they was made for each other, specially after that day when he jumped into the sluice and saved her from drownin'. And 'tis my belief they would ha' married if it hadn't been for that scoundrel Muster Lingwood, beggin' your pardon, miss."

"Ah well, we must hope things will come right now, you know."

"I always knew they would; leastwise, if not in this world, they be bound to come right afterwards. And all on us mustn't expect to get 'em righted here, miss," he added, with his exquisite touch of sympathy which she understood so well.

There was silence for a moment, and then the old man laid down his lines and looked at her.

"I've often wondered, miss," he said, "why the Colonel never left her nothin', knowin', as he did, she was his granddaughter. But he was a miserable old gen'leman, and dreadful bitter."

"Perhaps you will understand some day," she answered. "But don't you think that, if she had been an heiress, Mr. Gray might have been afraid of coming back?"

"Ah," said the old fisherman, "maybe you're right. What a lot o' trouble money do make, miss. 'Tis often a curse."

"It is, indeed," said Margaret sadly.

"I had a hundred pounds left me once by an uncle o' mine," went on Ward reflectively. "'Twas when I were a young man, afore I thought o' marryin'. Lord love ye, the trouble that money was, to be sure! 'Arf the girls in the village was a-settin' their caps at me, and I was in a mortal fright lest I should get the question put to me, seein' how as 'twas leap-year. And I didn't know what to do with it neither. Some advised one thing and some t'other. I was afraid to put it in the bank lest it should break, so I carried it about with me—twenty fi'-pun' notes in a purse. And one day, when we was out to sea, I was a-pullin' my pipe out o' my pocket, and somehow that 'ere purse got hitched up in it, and went overboard afore I could stop it. I was mighty put out for the time, but afterwards I felt happier than I'd done for many a long day—'specially when they girls heard on it and gave me the cold shoulder. . . . I had twenty pound put by in the savin's bank when I married my old woman, but if I ever thought 'twas that as made her say 'Yes' I'd have a divorce to-morrer."

Margaret laughed long and heartily.

"I don't think Mrs. Ward married you for your fortune," she said.

"No. She declares my ugly old face is my best fortune, miss. But don't you feel all this money a terrible worry?" he asked with all simplicity.

"Not a bit of it. It's made me very happy."

"Ah!" he replied, slightly puzzled, "but you'll make good use of it, miss; I knows you will."

A day or two after this, Margaret, who was sitting in the little Cottage parlour with Alice, heard the garden-gate click. She looked up quickly. Coming up the path, leaning upon a stick and limping with one leg, was a young man in the now familiar khaki uniform. She touched Alice on the arm.

"He is come," she said softly.

The girl said nothing, but blushed deeply. They went to the door to meet him. He looked older and much worn. He had gone out a youth and returned a man. Margaret greeted him warmly as she grasped his hand. But his eyes wandered from her face to Alice Carr-Mathers, and he took the girl's

hand in his. She did not say a word. Her eyes fell before him.

"Here I am," he said, "a poor soldier 'broke in the wars.' But I'm geting along famously," he added quickly; "you see, I can walk without a crutch now!"

He sat in the Cottage telling them the story of his battles. It was like the old days to hear his laugh, though that laugh had grown less boyish now.

"And what do the doctors say about you?" asked Margaret presently.

"They tell me I shall soon be all right—only my left leg will always be a little bit shorter than the other, you know. But I shall be able to play the organ soon—it won't be too short to reach the pedals. I've come in for a little money, too—and I'm going to get a post as organist somewhere. I've given up all thoughts of the law now—and I'm glad I have. I always wanted music, didn't I? But I haven't congratulated you yet, Miss Kingslake. I hear you're an heiress! And—and—I'm very glad about it."

"Even though I've usurped the rightful owner, Lawrence?" she said rather archly.

"Yes—that's just it. I mean—no, Bertha—Miss Carr-Mathers—I know you ought to have had everything—but, I mean I'm glad to hear of Miss Kingslake's good fortune, you know."

"And I am very glad," replied Alice softly.

"But now I want to hear the whole story from your own lips," went on the young man. "Letters are not explicit enough.'

"I think, perhaps, Alice can tell you," replied Margaret. "I must go down the village and get the wherewithal to prepare a feast for you. You stay here, you two good people."

And albeit Alice cast an imploring look at her, she went out of the room with a bright smile.

Alice was the first to break the silence.

"I am very, very sorry," she said. "Can you forgive me?"

"What for?"

"For having thought that those dreadful things about you were true. I was very wrong—and you have suffered from it because of me."

"Don't say any more," he replied. "I know it was all very black against me. You were not to blame."

"Oh, but I was. Say you forgive me. Please say it!"

"There is nothing to forgive now it has all come right—only a little dark memory that we must both forget."

"I don't know," she said sadly, "it is not easy to forget when one has done another wrong, and it comes home to them. And he, Mr. Lingwood, was so——"

"Please don't speak of him now. I don't want to hear of him. I know what a brute he has been to us both. He is another memory for us to forget."

"But I have caused you all the pain and sorrow—and—and——"

"Bertha," he said—"I may call you Bertha just as I did in the old days when we roamed over the marshes, mayn't I?"

She nodded her head without a word.

"I don't mind all that has happened, I can even thank Lingwood for his part in it, if—if the future may be what I hope it will. Do you know why I'm so very glad really that Margaret is the Colonel's heiress? It's a very selfish reason, Bertha!"

"What is it?"

He had taken her hand, nor did she draw it away.

"You remember the question I asked you on Christmas Eve?"

"Yes." Her voice had sunk to a whisper.

"I could not ask you that question again if you were the mistress of Rundleham Court."

"Why not, Lawrence?" and she looked up at him for a moment.

"Because I am only a poor man, Bertha. But now——"

"Yes?"

"I will ask it again. Darling, will you forget all that is past, and make me very happy? All these months I have been longing for you—sadly at first, but when Miss Kingslake's letter came—O Bertha, it was that that buoyed me up, and I've been counting the days, because I love you so, and because I wanted to ask you the old question. Dearest, let our lives go back to the days when we were so happy together and take up the thread from them. Say you love me—— You do, don't you, Bertha?"

"I am not worthy of loving you, Lawrence. I spoilt that love with my own blindness."

"I will not believe it! Let it come back."

She laid her head upon his shoulder as he drew her towards him.

"It has come back, dear," she murmured; "it never really went away. Only I was blind."

He kissed her gently.

"It has all come right now, darling, hasn't it?"

"Yes—but—but——"

"What?"

"Oh, will it ever atone for the past? For all your sufferings, Lawrence?"

"Dearest," he said, "I think our happiness will be the greater because we both have been through the fire. It has made our love stronger and wiser."

When Margaret returned they met her hand in hand, and then Alice sprang at her and put her arms round her neck.

"You young people have not been losing any time, I see. Dear child, I am so happy to see this. And you deserve it all, Lawrence. I've only got the mercenary part of the prize, you have gained the greater wealth. God bless you both! You have made me very, very glad!"

The tears started to her eyes as she kissed the blushing girl.

"O Sissy," whispered Alice, "I'm not a bit jealous of you. I'm only glad it has all happened as it has."

"Come," replied Margaret, laughing, "even if you don't want to be prosaic I do. It's time to be getting ready for lunch now. You shall have all the afternoon to talk to your heart's content."

Afterwards the two lovers strolled down to the sea, he leaning on her arm as he limped along. They stood by the shore watching the line of reddy-brown seaweed which the tide had left above high-water mark, the warm rays of the setting sun playing on it and producing a peculiarly rich effect of colour which they had often noticed and admired in the old days. They were so wrapped up in their happiness that they hardly heard the "scrunch, scrunch" of a sturdy footstep coming over the shingles behind them.

"Why, Master Lawrence," cried old Harry Ward as he came up, "'tis you sure enough, ain't it, sir? I'm glad to see ye back safe and sound from them 'ere Boers."

"Thank you. And how are you, Ward?"

"Same as ever, Master Lawrence, just as happy as a sand-boy, and hard at work all the time. Why, you be a-lookin' older."

"He's been wounded, Mr. Ward," said Alice.

"I knows it, miss. Lord, what a crooel hard thing war is, to be sure. But you ain't goin' out again, be ye, sir?"

"No, he's come home to stay," said Alice with a smile.

"I'm glad to hear on it, miss. Master Lawrence, sir," he added earnestly, "I told ye all 'ud come right."

"And it has," replied Lawrence cheerfully, "just as right as ever it can be. And you shall be the first friend after Miss Kingslake to congratulate us."

"What!" said the old man. "Is it true, miss?"

She nodded.

"Then the Lord be praised! Bless ye, sir, you've got to thank me partly for it! I carried her when she was a babby in from they marshes, and if Mr. Kingslake hadn't ha' taken her in, me and my missus would ha' give her a home. Not that us ever dreamed who she was a-goin' to turn out to be!"

"Ah, she doesn't want for a home now, do you, Bertha?" he said, still calling her by her old name. She held out her hand to the old man.

"Thank you," she said; "I know you're very pleased, Mr. Ward!"

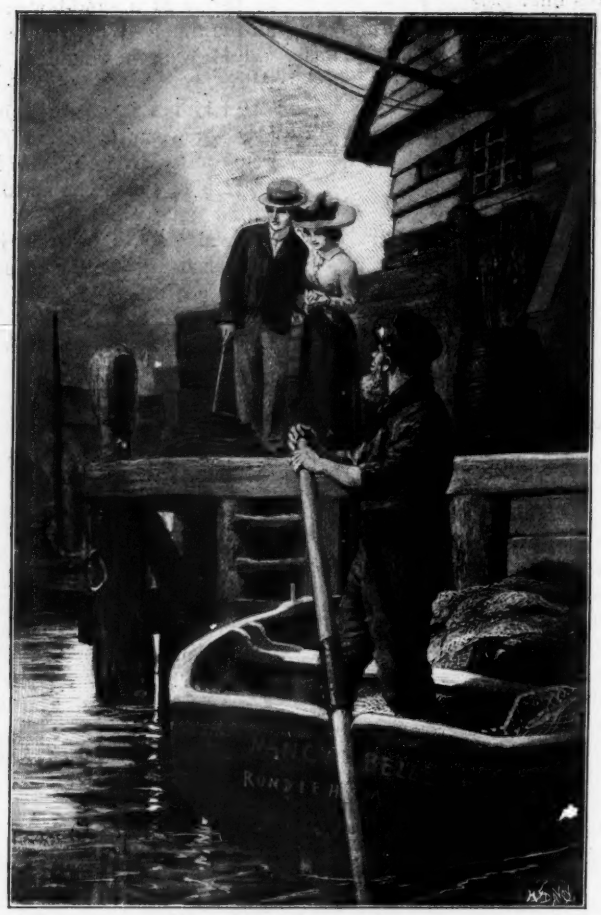
"Of coorse I be. Won't my old missus laugh when I tells her! But here comes Tom. We must go and shoot our hooks before 'tis dark."

"Is there room in the boat for us?" asked Alice.

"Ay, miss, if ye care to come."

So once more they sat, as they had so often done as boy and girl, in the stern of the boat, while the two old brothers pulled out to sea. Tom was silent as ever, but Harry puffed at his pipe and cracked his simple jokes, while his eyes sparkled with delight every time he looked at his happy passengers. And their hearts were calm as the bosom of that silent sea, for all was well with them—the storms of mistrust and pain had passed.

It was Gray's wish that they should be married on the coming Christmas Eve. It



"'Is there room in the boat for us?'"

was the great day of Alice's life. At last she was to be his own Christmas gift, just as years before the old fisherman had called her that, and the Vicar had received her as such. And Margaret had also insisted that the wedding feast should be held in Rundleham Court. It should be, so she said, her great opening of the house. So the repairs were hurried forward, and Margaret seemed to take special pains in submitting all her plans to the young couple. She consulted them about all the alterations till they took quite an interest in them. And all the time she smiled to herself and waited quietly. Occasionally Mr. Foster came from London to see her, and they were closeted together mysteriously discussing business.

And at last Christmas Eve came round, and once more the villagers came flocking to the little church. There was more than one of them that glanced at that row of the "unknown" graves in the corner of the churchyard, and whose eyes lit on one solitary new tombstone among the green mounds with a fresh wreath of flowers at its foot. And some of the older ones remembered that long ago Christmas Eve when she who lay beneath was brought into the village.

And now it was her child that came into

the church, radiantly happy on this her bridal morn to take her stand by the side of Lawrence Gray.

"Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?"

And Margaret Kingslake, strong and faithful to the last, bestowed Alice Carr-Mathers as a Christmas trust to the man who loved her, and thanked God in her heart that all had come well with them.

The old London lawyer had come down for the wedding, looking shrewd and mysterious. There was a little ceremony before the wedding breakfast. Margaret asked them to go into the library, where the presents had been arranged. Lying on the table was a bundle of fat, bulky parchments.

"I have not given you my present yet," she said, taking up the bundle. "This is a little surprise for you both."

"What is it?" exclaimed Alice.

"The title-deeds of the Carr-Mathers estate!" replied Margaret, smiling benignly upon them.

"What do you mean?" they both asked.

"It is really not my present at all, but the Colonel's. He wished you to have all. I didn't understand at first, but when I heard the will I knew what he meant. I have held the estate in trust for you; that is right, isn't it, Mr. Foster?"

The lawyer coughed. He was legal and precise.

"The estate devolved upon Miss Kingslake absolutely," he said, "and she has made it over by deed of gift. Perhaps in doing so she has respected the wishes of the late Colonel."

At first they were too overcome to thank her. Then Alice declared she would never accept it, but Margaret was firm.

"I insist upon it," she said. "What should I do with this big house? Live in it, and be happy. Besides, I haven't made everything over to you, have I, Mr. Foster?"

The lawyer smiled.

"Miss Kingslake has kept the Cottage for herself," he remarked.

"I thought you would not grudge me a corner, just to be near you," she said, laughing. "And so, after all, you have married an heiress, Lawrence. Come, do what Mr. Foster tells you, Alice, and sign these terrible-looking documents, and then lead the way to the festive board!"

So, amid smiles and tears, and thanks and protestations, Margaret carried the day, and Rundleham Court once more came into the possession of a descendant of the Carr-Mathers family.

That great dining-room, in which the grim old Colonel had sat so often in solemn loneliness over his meals, resounded with the laughter of youth once more. From study to servants' hall, from servants' hall to village, the news spread; and when, a few hours later, the carriage containing the bride and bridegroom rolled down the drive, a crowd had gathered at the gate to greet the new master and mistress of Rundleham Court.

Harry Ward shouted as loud as any one, yes, and threw a special old slipper that he had saved up for the occasion after the happy pair.

"You silly old man!" cried his wife, who had turned out too. "Ain't you ashamed o' yourself at your time o' life?"

In reply he delighted the crowd by dancing a hornpipe in the middle of the road and singing:

> Ding dong, ding dong,
> For it is our wedding-day!

"And you and me was young once, missus," he added, tucking his laughing wife under his arm and starting for home. "And if they lives to be as old as we, I hope they'll be as happy."

The little fisherman took a stroll late that afternoon as dusk was drawing in—a stroll over the marshes. Margaret Kingslake was standing by the old sluice wrapped in thought. The village bells, still ringing the bridal peals, were sounding over the low meadows. Bells of their happy future—bells that might have been hers years ago. So lonely she felt, so strange, now that it was all over. Through the mist of the years she saw that strong, manly figure she had loved so well coming over the familiar marshes—those marshes which had given up from their depths the drama of this little history. She had played her part in it nobly, unselfishly. She had been called upon to bear the suffering, and to have her reward in the joys of others.

She raised her head as the old man drew near. There were tears in her eyes, glittering

in the dull westward glow. He saw them. Instinctively he raised his cap and stopped. For a minute neither of them spoke. He was no longer the light-hearted man of half an hour before. His rough face beamed with tenderness. Perhaps he was the one human being who understood that sad, quiet figure most—and she knew it.

"'Tis all over, then, miss!"

"Yes—it's all over now."

"They be a bonnie pair, and I wish 'em happiness. Hark to the bells, miss! They'll soon be a-ringin' Christmas in."

"Sometimes they have a sad message, even at Christmas, Ward. They raise up memories."

"Ay, miss—but they ring out in the dark night from up above—a kind o' message to help us, so I ses sometimes."

"You always see the best of things, my old friend," she answered with a faint smile.

"Us that ha' bin through the storms and taken heart in the Lord always do—don't us, miss?" he said quietly.

"Yes—yes, we do," she replied, holding out her hand to him.

"A happy Christmas, Miss Margaret—God bless you!"

"A happy Christmas, my old friend—God has blessed us both!"

THE END

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